

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

Trinity And Community

July 3rd, 2016

2 Corinthians 13:11-14

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 13:11; that's on page 971 in your pew Bibles. We are at the end of our journey through the Corinthian Correspondence. Now, just like with Paul's introductions, his concluding paragraphs are often letters in miniature. Paul will very often summarize and conclude his entire argument by the way he crafts his farewell and benediction. There is a sort of skeleton style for Greek letters and Paul will add bits of meat here and there that serve to bring his argument in for a landing. Therefore my plan this morning is to read the paragraph and walk you through it so that you can see and appreciate Paul's argument, but then I want to reflect on what Paul says. Paul lands this entire correspondence in a very interesting place and I want to wrestle with that in order to apply it appropriately in our church and in our lives together. So we have a pretty ambitious agenda, so we better get right into the text; hear now the Word of the Lord:

¹¹ Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³ All the saints greet you.

¹⁴ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:11-14 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

In this closing paragraph we can observe some final counsel, some rich encouragement and a closing prayer. We'll look at it according to those categories. Let's look first at Paul's:

Final Counsel:

There are 5 imperative verbs – that is 5 commands – in verse 11. These 5 commands represent Paul's closing counsel to the church in Corinth. He tells them first of all to:

1. Rejoice in the Lord

Now, at first that seems like odd counsel. These people have a variety of complex problems and we might expect something a little more practical here, but actually, Paul's counsel reveals a deep and penetrating insight into human character. When people feel that they have less than they deserve they tend to be unkind and ungenerous to other people. Discontentment leads to bitterness so the solution to that is Gospel gratitude. It is to reflect upon all of the ways that God has been gracious to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself made that very point. He said that if we are unkind and ungracious and unmerciful to each other it only proves that we have never understood the grace of God in the Gospel. That is the point of the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. He did not appreciate what he had been given and therefore he was unkind to his fellow servants.

And so, Paul is saying, if you find it hard to live graciously with other people, you need to go back and remember the grace of God to you. Remember who you were and remember what God has done and rejoice. You can worship your way out of bitterness and unhappiness. Gratitude is therapeutic.

Secondly,

2. Reform your life and doctrine

Now this one isn't as obvious as the others because of the fact that there is no English word that adequately captures the sense of the Greek word that Paul uses here. Probably the best way to display the range of meaning would be to show you the ESV and the NASB translation side by

side. The ESV translates this command as:

Aim for restoration (ESV)

The NASB translates it as:

be made complete (2 Corinthians 13:11 NASB)

The word Paul used means to complete, or mend, or repair or make perfect. Paul seems to be saying that the chaos in their community stems from their immaturity as believers. His counsel seems to be that if they grow up in the Christian faith they will serve to repair their Christian community. One commentator paraphrases Paul's command in this way:

“Reform yourselves. Correct the evils that prevail within and among you”.¹

That is very insightful counsel! Paul seems to be saying that the best way to improve your relations with other people is to grow in your walk with the Lord. That is absolutely brilliant! See, the Bible consistently operates under the assumption that the problem with the world out there actually resides IN HERE. We are the problem! It isn't the environment, it isn't the social structures, it isn't the government – ITS US! And so the solution to social problems is not better systems – it is better people! Your sanctification – your growth in the Gospel – is actually the best gift you can give to your community. Grow up, Paul says. Become the man or the woman God has made you to be. Continue to work out your salvation. Reform yourself. Apply the grace of God to the brokenness in you and you will serve to repair the cracks in your community. That is very useful counsel.

Thirdly, Paul says,

3. Comfort one another with the Gospel

Again, this one is tricky to translate into English. The verb that Paul uses could be translated in a middle or passive sense – meaning he could be telling them to DO something or to have

¹ Charles Hodge, *2 Corinthians* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1995), 238.

something DONE to them. Again, the easiest way to show you this is to show you the ESV and the NASB side by side. The ESV renders it:

comfort one another (2 Corinthians 13:11 ESV)

The NASB renders it:

be comforted (2 Corinthians 13:11 NASB)

So which is it? Given that Paul often uses words in the closing paragraph of his letters that he introduced in the opening paragraph, it might be helpful to go back to chapter 1. There at the very start of the letter Paul said this:

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Corinthians 1:3–4 ESV)

There we see God comforting US so that we can comfort each other – therefore, I am inclined to think that its both! Paul is telling them to create a church culture that is built around receiving from God and ministering to one another. Listen friends, church life can fall apart if either aspect of that command is neglected. I have been to churches where receiving from God is dangerously deprioritized. I have been a part of churches that seem to communicate that once you are “saved” – once you have that ticket in your pocket – you don’t really need to receive anything further. You are now part of the work force – you go and serve others – and there is nothing left in the community for you. In churches like that we tell people that church isn’t for them its for their unsaved neighbours. But there is a problem with that. The problem is that we leak. We are nowhere near strong enough for that model. Paul tells them to build a church culture based BOTH on receiving and sharing. Hear the Gospel and preach the Gospel. Receive grace and give grace. Be comforted and comfort others with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. That’s humble – honest and helpful counsel.

Fourthly, Paul tells them to:

4. Be united in faith, feeling and focus

Literally Paul says: “Think the same”. Charles Hodge paraphrases it this way:

“Be united in faith, feeling, and in purpose”.²

Mark Seifrid understands it to mean:

“be intent on the same thing”.³

For a church to maintain a healthy community there has to be basic unity around certain key issues. As the Bible says:

Can two walk together, unless they are agreed? (Amos 3:3 NKJV)

Fellowship and partnership require a certain fundamental agreement. You can't live together, you can't do mission together unless you are agreed. Think about it, how could we actually execute our mission as a church, how could we do local or global mission unless we agree on the content and major categories of the Gospel? To do Gospel ministry we have to agree on the Gospel. We have to agree about who God is, what sin is, who Jesus is and what Jesus did to secure our salvation, we have to agree on the appropriate response to that and we have to agree on the eventual effect of that. Obviously there is a fair bit of agreement required to maintain a functional church.

Now some folks worry that talking in specifics and teaching in depth on these sorts of things will actually lead to less unity and less Gospel partnership. That argument gets made a lot in contemporary Evangelicalism. The prevailing wisdom is that if we just narrowed down and stuck to the very basics then we could facilitate a broader unity and present a more united front. But unity at the expense of truth is worth nothing. Paul doesn't tell the Corinthians to build their church by abandoning truth. He tells them to pursue common thinking. Talk about these things, persuade one another, arrive at a broad consensus and deep agreement – that is the way to build a healthy and functional church. The more you agree on, the more you can do together for the

² Charles Hodge, *2 Corinthians* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1995), 238.

³ Mark Seifrid, *The Second Letter To The Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 490.

glory of God and the good of all people.

Fifthly, lastly and related to that, Paul tells them to:

5. Live peaceably with one another

It is important that we notice the sequence and the logical relationships here. Paul is telling them to do two things that we often don't think go together. He is saying live peaceably and he is saying pursue unity of thought and unity of focus. We tend to think that you cannot do both. If we address these issues, if we deal in doctrine, then we will necessarily divide God's people – that's how we are wired to think, particularly as Canadians. But as we read the Bible it becomes clear that sometimes division is necessary on the way to peace. Paul commands division in 1 Corinthians 5; he commands that they excommunicate the brother who was persisting in sexual immorality:

“Purge the evil person from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:13 ESV)

So clearly for Paul, unity was not to be pursued at the expense of truth or holiness. We don't lower the bar, we don't change the Bible in order to keep everyone together. That isn't how Christians arrive at peace. Paul Barnett writes:

“The peace between them will arise from their God-given capacity to “think the same thing.””⁴

These things are connected – they have to be connected – or it isn't Christian peace.

Rich Encouragement:

Now Paul encourages the Corinthians to obey these 5 closing commands by connecting them to the promise of God's presence. He says that if you do these things:

the God of love and peace will be with you. (2 Corinthians 13:11 ESV)

⁴ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle To The Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 617.

Now to be clear, Paul isn't saying that if they do these things God will come – that would be closer to paganism than to Christianity. The pagans think that if they jump up and down and do this or that then the gods will take notice and draw near – that isn't what Paul is saying. He is saying that as the Corinthians grow in the Gospel – as they rejoice in their salvation, as they are changed and reformed by the Word of God and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, as they preach the Gospel and minister grace to one another, as they come together in the Gospel and with one another into a rich and deep and functional Gospel community – they will EXPERIENCE the presence of God in deeper and more intimate ways.

God is already HERE! He is present with us in the CHRIST of the Gospel. This is classic Paul! All throughout this letter he has been telling them to become what they are, to appreciate what they have and here he is telling them to EXPERIENCE what they POSSESS.

You HAVE God in your midst. Where Christ is received in faith – there God dwells in the midst! This is the key, Paul says – understand this, Paul says. When you clarify the reality, you deepen the experience. That's the way to what you want. You folks have been desiring a deeper experience of God – good for you! You thought you could find it through special revelations, mystical experiences and heavenly visitations – what you don't understand is that you already have what you want in Christ. You just need to understand that better and you will FEEL IT MORE. Get it into your mind and you will feel it in your heart.

Grow in the Gospel and you will grow in your experience of God.

Closing Prayer:

Now lastly, in terms of Paul's farewell paragraph – apart from his standard greetings to and from – we have his closing prayer and benediction. He says:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
(2 Corinthians 13:14 ESV)

This is probably the most famous benediction in all of Paul's letters because it is the only

benediction in which he mentions the entire Trinity. Most of Paul's benedictions are shorter and more succinct. For example, at the end of Galatians he says:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen. (Galatians 6:18 ESV)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. (Philippians 4:23 ESV)

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. (1 Thessalonians 5:28 ESV)

That is generally Paul's last word in his letters to his churches – the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you – why then here does he say so much more? Its almost as if Paul is saying: the more messed up you are as people, the more you need to know about God. That certainly fits with everything we've said so far. Paul is convinced that looking UPWARD is the way to live outward with other people. The Corinthians were divided, the Corinthians were conflicted, the Corinthians were confused so Paul says, you people need to look at God! Behold his unity and diversity! Behold his inner love and fellowship! See how he draws us in! The grace of Christ lifts us up into the love of the Father and includes us in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. This is where health and healing and community are found. Find it here so that you can live it there.

May:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14 ESV)

So ends Paul's counsel to the Corinthians.

Application:

Now, the job of the sermon is to do more than OPEN the text – it is also, finally, to apply the text. Our job as hearers of the text is to respond to the text with fresh conviction, affirmation and resolve. We want to be DOERS of the Word and not hearers only – Amen? Amen, so let me take just a few minutes to suggest some appropriate responses to this text. Number 1:

1. Let us resolve as a church to prioritize Gospel preaching over personal counseling

Now I want to explain almost every word of that to avoid misunderstanding. Notice first of all that I said that I want to PRIORITIZE Gospel preaching – I did not say that I want to delegitimize personal counseling. I think there is a place for personal counseling – I think there is a place for getting two people who aren't getting along into a room with a counselor or a mediator to try and work our way past relational barriers – I think that can be very helpful. I think that there is a place in the church for one on one counseling where we sit down with an individual who has some sort of a social dysfunction in their own life – they can't forgive, or they can't bond or they can't trust – or whatever, because of particular circumstances or painful events in their past. I think there is a place for that. And I think there is a place for POSITIVE ETHICAL and RELATIONAL instruction in the church. I think there is a place for a sermon – or at least a section of a sermon - on “5 Ways To Be A Better Husband” or “3 Ways To Be A Better Neighbour” – I am not opposed to those things. I'm just committed to the notion that they are often NOT the best way of getting at the real problem.

This teaching from the Apostle Paul seems to suggest to me that sometimes working up is a shortcut for working out. Meaning, sometimes if we could just SEE God better and understand the Gospel better our lateral relations would dramatically improve. More often than not it is a vertical break through that leads to horizontal peace.

I have seen this time and time again. I will meet with a married couple and they will tell me all of what they don't like about each other and all the ways this one has hurt that one and we could sort through all of that I guess, but I remain convinced that if you could just see what God has done for you in Christ – if you could remember who you were and what Jesus did – I am just convinced that it will change the way you look at each other. It will change the way husbands serve their wives; it will change the way wives respond to husbands – I am convinced of that. If we could have more of the grace of Christ, more of the love of the Father and more of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit I think that we could forgive and be more gracious and more loving and more sacrificial with each other and I think that would make almost all of our problems disappear.

That's what I'm saying. I'm not saying that counseling isn't helpful – it is, particularly when its done by people who understand this. Dr. Craig and I have had this conversation MANY times

and he agrees with what I am saying 100%. He spends most of his time pointing people to the Gospel and encouraging people to grow in Christ under the conviction that healed people don't hurt people anymore. Hurt people hurt people so if you can receive comfort in the Gospel – if you can be healed and changed by one degree of glory to another then you are going to stop hurting people – you are going to stop being bitter – you are going to learn to love and to trust and to forgive – you are going to learn to minister. We're going to get you there (horizontal peace) by taking you here (vertical peace). Whether in the pulpit, in the small group, in Family Circle or in the counseling room we are going to PRIORITIZE Gospel preaching.

Secondly and more personally:

2. Let us resolve to go to God first when we are struggling with other people

I am preaching to myself here but you are welcome to listen in. I constantly need to remind myself that most of what bothers me in other people actually comes from inside of me. If I find myself angry at my wife, or my neighbor or a co-worker more often than not, the problem is in me. I am drifting towards pride, or self entitlement or spiritual exhaustion. And so if I go to God first – before going to the person – I often find that I don't need to go to the person at all. I don't need to confront my neighbor or my wife or my co-worker – because really the problem is that I am just a jerk that needs Jesus! 9 times out of 10 its as simple as that! I need to go to God and see again his love and goodness. I need to rehearse the Gospel. I need to remember my sinfulness and Christ's sufficiency. I need to reconnect with the Holy Spirit. I need to let him guide me and speak to me through the Word – I just need to get into that place. And I can do that I discover there that I am at peace with other people. I don't need to talk to them, I just needed to talk to God.

Now sometimes you do have to come out and speak to people. You have to speak the truth in love, you have to show a brother or a sister the error of their ways – I know that. But I also know that if you do it first, you won't do it right. Speak to God first – go to God first – and it will change the way you speak to other people.

I can think of few things that would sweeten our church fellowship more than the wholesale adoption of that resolution. Go to God first before you deal with one another.

The secret to Christian community is intimate communion with God. The more we know the grace of Christ, the love of the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit the easier it will be to love and live with other people. This is what you were made for – this is what you were saved for and this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let's pray together.