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Sermon Series: *Peace, No. 4*

Be Well, Restored, Guided, United, At Peace

March 26, 2023

2 Corinthians 13:11-14 [NIV]

Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

¹² *Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³ All God's people here send their greetings.*

¹⁴ *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

If you have a Bible nearby, it might be helpful to turn back, if you would, to that Second Corinthians passage. This is the second letter that we have from the Apostle Paul to a church that he deeply loved, but that was deeply fractured.

Second Corinthians, Chapter 13.

The text I want to look at there this morning can tend to get a little lost, actually in three different ways.

This first is that when people hear "Corinthians 13," most jump to *First* Corinthians because that's where the "*Love is patient, love is kind, it doesn't envy or boast...*" passage is — made popular, of course, by weddings.

That's the first way today's passage from *Second* Corinthians 13 can get overlooked.

The second way, if they get to the right book, is the way people can sort of fixate on verse 12: Paul's command to "*greet each other with a holy kiss.*"

In our culture anyway, that's at least an "eyebrow-raising" proposition. Our culture just isn't used to that sort of expression.

And then, it's also easy for people to jump right to verse 14, which is not only very well known, but also a very theologically significant benediction: more of a closing prayer or blessing,

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

In that verse 14, Paul gets as close to defining the concept of the Trinitarian God as he probably ever does; he even begins with Jesus and not God the Father. Theologically speaking, this is a helpful look at how Paul understood that Father, Son and Spirit work together in our world and in the life of a Christ-follower.

So, for those three reasons (and they are good, provocative reasons), many people, as they close out their reading of Second Corinthians, can quite unintentionally just glaze right over the very verse that we want to look at today in our theme of peace: verse 11 there, where Paul writes, according to my older NIV, "*Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.*"

After a series of very uncomfortable and strained interactions with this confused, conflicted and even contentious church, Paul closes his communication with

this string of, hmm, imperatives. That word sounds better than "orders" or "commands" or "directives," but really, that's what we have in verse 11.

Paul is telling them what they need to do.

Now, the fact is, our American culture does not like imperatives; generally speaking, as a people, we don't like to be told what to do. And in that way, our cultural norms here in the United States unfortunately mesh very comfortably with the sinful human nature.

In fact, I'd go as far as to say that one way to pretty accurately measure the depth of a person's Christian transformation is to watch how they respond to legitimate authority in their life.

Teachability and humility are intimately related; both are measures of our ability to admit that we're broken and fallible and don't know it all — that we are willing to listen and learn.

The more teachable a person becomes and the more they're willing to receive and put into practice the voice of true Christian guidance and authority in their life, the more serious they are about God and the more closely they resemble Jesus.

And I'm confident in asserting that because it's upon that very principle that the Apostle Paul is depending here.

We can easily tell by Paul's letters that at least a portion of the believers there at Corinth were very, very full of themselves. They simply wanted to do what they wanted to do: things that, even beyond the attitudes involved, happened to be quite ungodly and prideful and incompatible with following Jesus.

So, what can a person like Paul do in a situation like that?

Although these people Paul was dealing with were spiritually immature, they were also adults — grown men and women.

What Paul faced here was very much like parenting.

When a child is young, a parent can, and frankly should, *make* that child do the right thing, not only for the sake of the child's earthly and eternal welfare, but also for the sanity of the parent.

Far too often in our world today, children grow into unruly adults simply because their parents allowed them to be unruly children.

Just the same, every parent knows that at some point, they can no longer *make* their children obey them. It's at that point that children have to decide for themselves that they will listen to the parent's wisdom.

Well, the situation was very similar for Paul here.

At least a portion of the Corinthian believers, as I said, were spiritually immature — they were very prideful and still thought more of pleasing themselves than pleasing Jesus.

At the same time though, they were grown adults, so they had to *choose* to listen to Paul, their spiritual father.

Realizing all this, Paul knew that all he could do was to lovingly tell them the right thing to do, and then pray that God's Spirit would soften their hearts so they might receive his word.

And that's just what Paul does here.

There was conflict and division in the church there that was hurting everyone.

It was hurting those *around* the Church, because a divided, conflicted body of Christ paints, for the world, a terrible picture of Jesus.

But that conflict was also hurting those in the church—making the very people involved miserable.

I mean, only *sick* or *evil* people *enjoy* conflict.

Of course, sometimes, where truth is concerned *conflict is unavoidable*. But even then, it's *not enjoyable*.

When a parent disciplines an errant kid and says to him or her, "Honey, this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you," that's really true—or, at least it should be.

Young people: I know you may not believe that when your parents have said it, but they're not lying to you.

Good, responsible people do not savor conflict.

And by Paul's manner here, we can tell that at least most of the Corinthian believers recognized that. They saw the dangers of conflict, and probably even those who started it were in some way tired of it—because over time conflict does just wear you out.

So, is there a way to peace, and if so, what is it?

Hoping they're ready to receive it, that's what Paul addresses here in verse 11 by way of, again, five imperatives.

Paul tells them what they need to do in order to reach peace.

Now different translations will have different nuances because there are some questions about voice here in the Greek. We don't have that in the same way in our English, so translating this into English is tricky in a couple places.

But I think a pretty reasonable translation might go like this:

First – the word *chairete* is a word that is often translated "rejoice," as I'm sure it is in some of your Bibles. But when it is used in an expression at the end of a letter, as it is here, it's a common way to close the communication, as one might say, "fare well," or, "be well."

That's Paul's first imperative: "be well, pursue wellness, goodness, stability" – not conflict.

Set yourself in pursuit of wellness.

Be well.

He then moves on to the word *katartizesthe*, which literally means, "be perfected," or maybe more accurately in our language, "be complete, be restored, be whole, be mended."

Paul is calling for those there to take action to bring restoration and wholeness to the fractures in their body. Make amends, heal divisions, come back together.

Be restored.

The third is the word *parakaleisthe*, which literally means, "be comforted."

You can hear in there the word *paraclete*, which is used for God's Spirit.

But the Biblical concept of "comforter" is much more than what our English suggests – our feeling better. That's why some of our translations have the better sense of, "Listen to me, do as I tell you, hear my counsel and do as I say."

Be teachable. Be led. *Be guided.*

The fourth imperative here is the word *phroneite*, which means, "be united in mind, or come together in the way you think about things."

Come together – in *truth*, of course. Not just in any crazy idea that comes along. Paul would never advocate for unity at the cost of truth.

But he does say, "come together in what's good and right."

Be united in mind.

And then the last there, *eireneuete*, which means "live in peace," or "be at peace."

Do not pursue division any more. Do not chase after conflict and upheaval.

Instead, give your energies toward pursuing peace.

Be at peace.

To the conflicted church there at Corinth, Paul gives five commands:

- Be well.
- Be restored.
- Be guided.
- Be united in mind.
- Be at peace.

These are not mere *wishes* or *hopes*.

These are *directives*.

But then, look what he says right after (the end of verse 11 there), "*and the God of love and peace will be with you.*"

Now, here is the point I really want to make about all this.

From time to time you hear of people – very religious-sounding people, some very *sincere* people – praying that God would give them peace: praying that God would bring peace to their *own* minds or hearts, or maybe peace in their *families* or in their *communities* or in their *churches*.

But then, their prayer for peace is where their part ends for them, as if they can just set their situation in God's hands and tell Him, "Here, it's all up to you – you fix it."

That is *nowhere near* the Apostle Paul's approach *here*.

From time to time you hear people say, “Well you know what the Bible says, ‘God helps those who help themselves.’”

OK, the Bible *never* says that. Let’s make that clear.

But, this verse here, verse 11, may be as close as the Bible gets to saying that, because this verse (along with many others) tells us that God *does* expect us to play a part in the working out of the world He wants to create.

God is not our cosmic vending machine.

We cannot just push a button through prayer and expect Him to simply dispense what we ask for—and especially not regarding those things that have to do with peace in interpersonal relationships.

Paul, here, very clearly, lays out for the Corinthians how God works in those sorts of situations.

The God of love and peace will be with us, *as we will work toward and pursue:*

Wellness one with another.

Restoration one with another.

Willingness to be guided by God and those in authority over us.

Being *united in mind* with those around us, and

Being at *peace* with those with whom we’re at odds.

In other words, a life of peace takes work on our part.

A life at peace with those around us is not something we can just dump in God’s lap and expect Him to magically produce.

Just as a life of peace required something of those Corinthian believers, a life of peace requires something of us, and if we’re not interested in doing the work required—if we’re not willing to follow Paul’s commands here, then there’s not a whole lot we can reasonably expect from God.

God will be with those who will be with Him in purpose and effort.

He’ll come alongside those who will walk alongside Him.

But we can hardly expect Him to repair a situation that we are actively working on destroying.

Of course, this is no new idea; we see this all through God’s interaction with humanity.

But we see it very clearly here.

God blesses those who engage and work toward the things that are important to Him.

His blessings come to those who will receive them and *not* to those whose lives shut them out.

Obedience to His leading and guiding is always a condition of His blessing, and we’ll receive what He offers to the degree that we’ll do as He asks.

For example, Jesus says in Luke 6:38, “*Give, and it will be given to you.*” You give first, and then you will be given to. “*A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*”

To be given to: we have to give. That’s aligning ourselves with God’s purposes, you see?

Or Jesus again in Matthew 6:33, “*But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and (then) all these things will be given to you as well.*”

There’s a seeking we have to do in order to enjoy all the blessings He wants to give us.

James writes, “*Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him*” (James 1:12).

The crown of life comes to the one who stands the test, the one who perseveres through the trial and who loves God.

You don’t think it requires work on our part to persevere under trial? A whole lot of believers today and through the ages would beg to disagree.

With regard specifically to peace: yes, it is indeed a divine grace, but there is always some human effort involved to attain it.

Hebrews 12:14, “*Make every effort to live at peace with all people.*”

So, here’s the thing: it’s great to want peace. It’s great even to pray for it.

But chances are that God’s not going to dispense it if we’re not willing to do our part in it—and that goes for peace *within* us and also peace *around* us.

Here’s the question for us this morning: if there is a place of discord in your life—either within or without, is there also a corresponding place where you’ve not been willing to do as God is asking you to do?

Now, I’m not saying there has to be, necessarily. Sometimes peace is slow in coming.

We may ask the Lord about this, and He may well say, “No, we’re good with Him. We’re current with Him and doing all He’s asking of us.”

But just the same, it’s worth honestly asking. It’s worth praying, “Lord, regarding this conflict I’m experiencing, is there any place within me where I’m not willing to listen to you?”

“Is there any command you’re giving me that I’m resisting?”

“Is there any place where I’m not willing to be well?”

“Is there any place where I’m not willing to be restored with someone else?”

“Is there any place where I’m not willing to be guided by You or someone speaking for You?”

“Is there any place where I’m not willing to be united in mind with those around me?”

“Is there any place where I’m not willing to be at peace with those with whom I’m at odds?”

“If there is, Lord, show me that place, forgive me for my stubbornness, and bring me into line with You, so that You, the God of love and peace, will be with me.”

Peace is not something we can just sit around and hope for.

The prayer for peace is not, “God, give me peace.”

The prayer for peace is, “God, make me the person of peace you intend me to be.”

Would you dare to pray that prayer today? The prayer that opens ourselves to, both God’s work in us – and our work with Him?

Closing Prayer

Closing Song: *Instruments of Your Peace*

Benediction:

I was reading in a book that was written in the mid-1950s, 70 years or so ago, and this is what the author was saying about peace and conflict. He said that part of the reason there’s so much conflict in our world, in our nation, in our families, in our schools, and frankly in our churches today, is because we know too much about what everyone else thinks.

Living in close contact with others always makes peace and harmony more difficult, and the more people we have to live in close contact with, the harder peace is to achieve.

Because of technology, we’re more connected than ever before with more people than ever before, so of course peace is harder to achieve.

So, more than ever before, peace requires a continual process of *reconciliation* and of working *with* God to achieve it.

But it’s so worth it, not only because God commands it, but also because of the tremendous witness a peace-filled church can be to a conflicted nation.

But for the Christ-follower, peace never starts with *that person over there* or *those people over there*. For the follower of Christ, peace starts *here* with *me* – with *us*.

May we all agree to do the work involved in being instruments in God’s hands – instruments of His peace.