

# A CALL TO LOVING MATURITY

## *SERIES: THE IMPORTANCE OF MODELS*

**By Doug Goins**

“Finally, brethren...” are the words which begin the closing paragraph of the apostle Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church. While I was re-reading both letters this week, I was reminded of an old Russian proverb that says, “It’s the same with people as it is with donkeys: Whoever would hold them fast you must get a very good grip on their ears.” It’s been that way with our studies in these letters.

The apostle has, over a period spanning several years, gotten a grip on the ears of his Corinthian brothers and sisters, and I hope he has gotten a grip on our ears this past four years as well. Our attention has been held fast and we’ve seen consistently our 20th century lives and circumstances played out in these letters—the amazing relevance of his first century words and insights for life in the church today. Paul has instructed us, enlightened us, and at times indicted us and challenged us, while always encouraging us.

In every passage, even when there has been sternness or confrontation, Paul has remained amazingly loving toward the body of believers in Corinth. In spite of a difficult relationship with these believers, Paul never gave up on them. Whatever he had to say was underscored by love. His patience with this church is amazing. Think about it. This is one of four letters that Paul wrote. He made several trips to be with these folks, as well as sending different associates to minister among them in his absence. Paul consistently worked to help that church deal with sinful attitudes and behaviors because he wanted them to be all that God designed them to be. But he also wanted them to have a presence in the city of Corinth. He wants them to have an impact both individually and collectively, to make a difference in that city.

He closes the 2 Corinthian letter with one last call to loving maturity. And it’s a re-emphasis of his prayer for them that we considered last time (Discovery Paper #4657). He says in chapter 13: “Now we pray to God that you do no wrong... but that you may do what is right... this we also pray for, that you be made complete” (2 Corinthians 13:7, 9b). He is praying for them to grow up in Christ. He is praying that all the truth they have been taught will come together in their lives and will have an impact.

### **Practical commands for living in Christian community**

There’s really nothing new in these last four verses. Everything Paul says here can be found somewhere else in much fuller detail throughout both these letters. Paul uses repetition more like a summary or possibly as a reminder. As I was studying and reflecting on this passage, I thought about phone conversations I’ve had with my children through the years they have been away at college. At the end of those conversations, in a very parental way I would say something like, “Don’t forget what I said about this...” or, “Be sure to double check on that....” Likewise, these are things the apostle doesn’t want us to forget.

**Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. 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)

What struck me initially is the love that flows out of these final words. In verse 11, he calls every one of these Corinthian Christians his brothers and sisters, most literally, his “dear friends.” And in the end of the benediction he is certain that all the resources listed there of the godhead will be “with you all.” He wraps his arms around the entire congregation. Paul doesn’t make any distinction in this closing between the people who had attacked him and the people who had been supportive of him in his years of ministry there. And, from that loving acknowledgement of his solidarity with them flow six requests; requests from a spiritual father to his spiritual family. These are practical commands for living in Christian community.

Again, as I studied this passage, I noticed that the phrases fall into one of two categories: they are either in the imperative voice, which means they are a strong command, or they are in the indicative voice, which means they are statements about who God is, what God has provided, and what God has done or will do for them.

## **Imperatives of grace**

Beginning in verse 11, we find the first command is “rejoice,” which is kind of strange if you think about it. We are told to laugh and to be joyful. However, some translations don’t say that at all. The Revised Standard Version (“RSV”) simply says “farewell,” or the New International Version (“NIV”) says, “good-by.” But the root term means to be cheerful, to be joyful, or in other words, laugh more. Laughter ought to spill out of our lives. Natural, spontaneous, grateful laughter for God’s goodness, for his grace, his provision. It ought to spill into our homes, our church, and our places of work.

King Solomon wrote in Proverbs, “A joyful heart is good medicine...” (17:22). Scientists have discovered that laughter does have medical benefits. Laughter creates a morphine like endo-enzyme in the brain that actually reduces pain. The French Jesuit priest, Teilhard de Chardin wrote, “Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.”

Three different times in his letter to the church in Philippi (3:1, 4:4, 10) Paul used the same word he uses here in 2 Corinthians 13:11. There he exhorts his readers to “rejoice in the Lord” and to see him as the source of everything good and wonderful in life.

In thinking about the laughter and joy in my own life, the first things that came to mind were times spent with Christian brothers and sisters. Mostly, people I’ve been involved with in ministry that was sometimes strenuous and difficult and yet ministering together as comrades in arms resulted in tremendous, infectious joy because we were joyfully serving Christ, investing ourselves, pouring ourselves out for the work of the Kingdom.

The second command is “be made complete.” That relates to Paul’s earlier prayer that we looked at. It’s more than a general call to maturity, but actually a call to Christian wholeness. It comes from a Greek word that means “restoration.” It means supplying what is missing to bring about full usefulness. It’s used for mending a fishing net that has been torn, or for setting a broken bone, or for equipping an army with supplies. Basically, patching up anything that’s been injured or damaged. The RSV translates this little phrase, “mend your ways.” The challenge really makes sense in the Corinthian

context because they are a divided church—divided spiritually, relationally, even theologically—over what they share in common. They needed to be restored or mended in their relationship to God, to one another, and to the apostle Paul.

As you think about your involvement in these Corinthian letters over the past four years, this is an important exhortation for us as well. Are you “mending your ways” in response, perhaps, to being confronted with some of the truths in these letters? Is there spiritual restoration going on in your life? What difference have these studies made in your life? I remember hearing an aphorism years ago: “It is not important how many books of the Bible we get through, but how many books of the Bible get through us.” That would be the question today as we come to the end of this study in 2 Corinthians.

The third command is to “be comforted.” The Greek word that Paul uses here is a familiar word, *paracaleo*. It has many different meanings, but in this context, it’s the same word that John uses for the Holy Spirit, the one who comes alongside to help us in following the Lord. It can also be used as a command to encourage or to cheer or to console one another. But a lot of scholars believe in this context that Paul is using it in a sense of exhortation. For example, Philip Edgcumbe Hughes writes, “It seems preferable to translate it here in it’s other sense, namely, ‘be admonished’ or ‘heed my appeal,’” (1) which is how it’s translated in the RSV. Paul is pleading with the Corinthians to respond to all the challenges, all the appeals, and to all he implored in both of these letters and through his many visits.

That makes sense for us today as well. Because if we are going to find spiritual encouragement, clarification, and comfort about how to live life, we too should be willing to heed Paul’s counsel, which means being willing to live submissively to the scriptures—to understand and apply God’s word and live it out.

The fourth command is “be like minded.” Literally, to “think the same thing.” Now, to think the same thing does not mean that we always agree on everything. He is not asking for absolute uniformity in dress, in appearance, cultural taste, or even actions. We don’t have to all like the same kind of praise and worship music, to think the same way, or have the same mind. He *is* asking for us all to have the same focus—to agree on spiritual core issues, the things most essential in the Christian life.

There is a quote I found while in seminary that I’ve kept on my office wall the past 25 years. It may have come from the writings of a 17th-century German theologian, Rupertus Meldenus, or someone else suggested it was Augustine, or perhaps the great puritan pastor, Richard Baxter. In any event, the quote says: “In necessary things, unity. In unnecessary things, liberty. In all things, charity.”

In his letter to the church in Philippi, the apostle Paul stresses the same concern. He wrote this in Philippians:

...make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.... (Philippians 2:2-5)

The only way to have the attitude of Jesus is to know him and to love him; to grow in relationship to him. And when we are like-minded toward Jesus, toward the truth of his word, we will be like-minded toward one another. We won’t be rigid, defensive toward each other, but open and supportive. That’s the secret to living in Christian community. And the result will be that we really can live in peace, which is the fifth imperative found in verse 11.

Living in peace was Paul's concern for this church because they had major relationship difficulties. Now, in thinking about what it means to live out peace, we've got to remember that even in these two letters Paul has made it clear that *all* followers of Christ will be caught up in spiritual warfare (the opposite of peace). But the warfare is going to go on inside of us and it will be directed toward the hearts and minds of the people who don't know Jesus. There is a legitimate place for a call to battle, but we are not to be at war with one another. We are to live together peacefully as the body of Christ. I mean, who wants to participate in an organization whose members cannot get along? Why would churches that are full of factions, fighting and feuding be attractive to anyone, let alone non-Christians? We are suppose to be different from the world. Not selfishly putting our own agenda forward but working together harmoniously. Do you live in peace? Do you calm the waters around you or do you tend to stir things up? Do you enjoy controversy? Are you a friend or an adversary?

The final imperative is in verse 12: "Greet one another with a holy kiss." When I was in junior high school, just discovering girls, I remember being really fascinated with this verse. Maybe even fixated on it. However, I was really disappointed when somebody told me that in the Jewish synagogue, which is where this custom came from, the men and women sat in different places and the men kissed the men and the women kissed the women. I lost interest in it quickly!

This call to a holy kiss is neither a religious ritual, nor an empty gesture. Paul wants this to be evidence of the Christian's affection and concern for one another. It's not from impure motives, or sensuality, but from holiness and brotherly love. The early church was known, even among pagans, for their visible expressions of sincere love. Paul knew that that was desperately needed in Corinth because of their relationship struggles.

This is needed just as much among us. Here, today, our common life together ought to be marked by genuine expressions of affection. Whether it's through holy hugs, holy kisses, holy handshakes, or holy eye contact, we need to talk to each other; to express sincere interest and concern for one another's welfare. When we ask someone how they are, we should really mean it and then be willing to listen to a response.

Those are the six commands, imperatives for living in Christian community. You may be wondering if you can do this. You may review your life and history of relationships and see that you struggle with the call to rejoice, to joy and laughter. You may say, "I'm melancholy by temperament. I'm not a real joyful person. I don't laugh easily."

To the call of mending our ways, you may think: "I'm way too set in my ways. I'm not going to change much more. I know myself."

To the call to heed Paul's appeal, to submit to scripture or literally, to be comforted, you may say: "I'm much too rebellious for that. I have too many conflicts with the Bible. I struggle too much with too many sections of scripture."

To the call to have the mind of Christ, you may just think you are much too self-centered: "I've tried. I've studied, but I'm just not there."

To the call to live in peace, having godly friendships, being a peacemaker, you may have decided that your personality is too irascible: "I'm just too hard to get along with. That's who I am."

Or, to the most frightening call of all: the issue of affection—hugging and kissing and looking people in the eye—you may be saying, "I am way too inhibited for that. Don't ask me to do that. That's not why I come to PBC!"

If you feel stuck in any of those areas there really is good news: God never asks us to do anything that he has not already provided all of the necessary resources we will need to fulfill his requests.

## **Practical promises for living in Christian community**

So, in the conclusion to this letter, Paul leaves them with some very encouraging promises of God; indicative statements of the provision that God has made to ensure that his people in Corinth *can* and *will* learn to rejoice, to be made complete, to be comforted, to be like-minded, to live in peace, and to be affectionate with one another. The promises are powerful and amazing.

Now, these phrases—“the God of love and peace will be with you” (v. 11), “all the saints greet you” (v. 13), “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ will be with you,” “the love of God will be with you,” “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit will be with you” (v. 14)—are in both tone and content very close to the opening paragraph of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. In that opening, he expresses hopeful optimism in God’s sovereign faithfulness to complete the saving work he has begun in his people. He writes, “God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:9). Again, God will not call us into relationships that he isn’t committed to being faithful to help us grow up in those relationships, and to become everything he wants us to be.

## **Indicatives of grace**

Let’s look at these practical promises for living in Christian community, these indicatives of grace. The first one is found in verse 11, “...the God of love and peace shall be with you” is a very strong word of assurance. We *can* trust God’s presence and power to be at work in us. God himself is the source of the love and the peace that the Corinthians so desperately needed. The only way the Corinthians, and us as well, can obey those six important imperatives of grace that we just examined is by drawing on God’s resources. We look to him alone to make us the loving people we need to be in community. He is the only one who can give us peace so we can be peacemakers.

The second wonderful promise is in verse 13: “All the saints greet you.” This is more than just a normal closing of a letter. It echoes Paul’s salutation in 1 Corinthians: “...to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours...” (1 Corinthians 1:2). Paul wanted them to be a loving, peaceful community. And he wanted them to understand that they were a part of something much greater than themselves. As saints of God they were part of a world-wide fellowship. Already, back in chapters 8 and 9, Paul had addressed the unity of the church in Corinth with the church in Macedonia. Paul had told them they had a love relationship with people they didn’t even know, people they had never met, and may never meet.

It’s important for us to know that we are part of something bigger as well. God is at work in all the saints all around the world. That saves us, as a church, from self-centeredness, from provincial-ism, from believing that we are the center of the spiritual universe. I’m grateful for the influences, the presence of people like Eli and Clara Fungidae of Indonesia, Azad Marshall in Pakistan, and Jaime Guerrero in Mexico, who challenge us and remind us of God’s presence and power at work in other places, beyond PBC.

Paul also told the saints in Corinth, again back in chapters 8 and 9, how the Macedonian saints pray for them regularly. That's another important spiritual resource that we can claim as the church of God: the resource of the prayers of his saints.

In my travels, the request of Christians in third world countries is always the same: "Ask the Christians of PBC to pray for us." They believe that we are united with them in Christ and that our prayers do make a difference, as do their prayers for us. The provision here is the unity and reciprocity of the church of God around the world and the benefits of churches praying for one another.

## **Resources we need to be a mature, loving Christian community**

The letter ends in verse 14 with a grace benediction. This is one of the most beautiful and most beloved benedictions in our 2,000 year history of worship in the church. This benediction assures us that all the resources we need to be a mature, loving Christian community are available to us in God.

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

Long before the church had developed any kind of formal doctrine of the trinity, the apostle Paul was using the three persons of the trinity in his benedictions, just like the Lord Jesus had done in his great commission recorded at the end of Matthew 28. Here, Paul carefully structures a Trinitarian blessing. He lists each of the persons of God and their main gifts to the church. This statement concludes the letter on a wonderfully positive note. This is not pious, wishful thinking, but a confident statement of fact. You could translate this last phrase as, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, *are* with you all." Paul's confidence in these believers is based ultimately on God; on his presence, his power, and his provision in their midst. Literally, God at work among them as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The first gift listed in the benediction, the "grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is with you all," takes us back to Bethlehem, to Christ's humble birth. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." Jesus lived in poverty so that we could be spiritually rich men and women. God's grace at work counters our tendencies toward self-assertiveness, self-promotion or aggrandizement in the community of faith.

The second gift, the second phrase, "the love of God is with you all," takes us back to Jesus' death on Calvary. John wrote in his gospel, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God gave his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. And the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." That sacrificial love counters our sinful jealousy, competition, and angry resentment toward other people in the body of Christ.

The final gift, the "fellowship of the Holy Spirit is with you all," takes us back to Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came and baptized all believers into the body of Christ when the church was formed. Do you recall what that fellowship was like immediately after Pentecost? Luke's historical record in Acts tells us:

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. *And all those who had believed were together*, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day *continuing with one mind in the temple*, and breaking bread from house to house, *they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God* and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47, *emphasis mine*)

Our fellowship in the Spirit, our commonality, the communion that we share as brothers and sisters in Christ, counters quarrels and factions and competition. It's the Holy Spirit that creates unity among us, sustaining harmony in the church.

The Corinthian Christians desperately needed, as do all of us today, God's blessing of grace and love and fellowship. Today, just as back then, there are people who will emphasize law instead of grace. Exclusiveness rather than love. Independence instead of fellowship. But legalism and division and competition in the church can be overwhelmed by these spiritual resources.

The "Church" of Jesus Christ around the world, including specific churches in Kupong, Timor, Lahore, Pakistan, Mexico City, and Palo Alto, can only be sustained by the miraculous ministry of God. There is no amount of human skill or talent or creativity or programs that can make us what we ought to be as the Church. Only God can do that. And Paul was convinced that God would do it in Corinth. Despite the current factions and rebellions, he applies this wonderful blessing to everyone in the church.

As I suggested before, Paul ends this second letter where he began his first one. Notice how he began with such optimism:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:3-9)

Paul will not allow them to get bogged down in sinful failures and lose sight of the ultimate victory that is theirs in Jesus Christ. Like them, our future is as secure as those same promises. But that should not lead to our passivity. Rather, it should motivate us to depend more and more on the grace of God, to walk together more and more in the love of God, to participate more and more in the fellowship of God's Holy Spirit. The result will be very practicable and observable: We will be more and more a part of the answers here at PBC rather than part of the problem.

We can live out this benediction. We can *be* a benediction of blessing to people around us, extending love and mercy, drawing people into fellowship, into communion that we share in Jesus. Each of us can ask God to make us that kind of Christian brother or sister. These are the commands we are called to in terms of living in Christian community and the promises, the resources, God has given us to do so.

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NOTES:

(1) Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. © 1962, Wm. B. Eerdmann’s Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI. P. 487.

Catalog No. 4658  
2 Corinthians 13:11-14  
29th Message  
Doug Goins  
July 15, 2001

[Back to Index page](#)

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