

“Building Up, Not Tearing Down,” 2 Corinthians 12:19-13:14 (Ninth Sunday After Pentecost, August 11, 2019)

¹⁹ Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved. ²⁰ For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. ²¹ I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.

This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ² I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them— ³ since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. ⁴ For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God. ⁵ Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! ⁶ I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test. ⁷ But we pray to God that you may not do wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed. ⁸ For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. ⁹ For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for. ¹⁰ For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

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.

PRAY

As we begin I want to give you a heads up: next week Lord willing we'll begin a five week series on what it means to be a human being and have relationships. We'll look at friendship, marriage, dating. We'll look at the Bible and see how it critiques modern understandings of human sexuality. I pray it will be an informative series and helpful to you.

But today we finish our summer series on 2 Corinthians. What we call the book of 2 Corinthians is actually a letter the apostle Paul wrote a church he started in the ancient city of Corinth almost two thousand years ago. Perhaps you noticed that Paul in our passage for today has something of an adversarial tone. Paul is frustrated with the church because after he left Corinth some other

teachers came along and began to make a wreck out of the work Paul had started there. These teachers were leading the church at Corinth away from the Lord.

It's a tense situation in Corinth. Paul isn't one hundred percent sure how it will turn out, and you can feel it as he closes the book of 2 Corinthians.

But what can we learn from this passage? Two things: *first, the mission of the church.* And when I use the word "church" I want you to clearly understand what I mean. Typically, when we use the word "church" we think of a building where religious services are conducted or a non-profit organization. That's not how I'm using the word today, and that's certainly not what Paul meant. **In the New Testament, the word you see translated as "church" simply means "an assembly," or "a gathering of people" who follow Jesus Christ.** That's it, and I need you to hold that definition in your mind throughout the sermon or you'll get off track. In this passage, we can learn the mission God has given the church. *Then the second thing we can learn is how to accomplish the mission.* The mission of the church and how to accomplish it.

First, the mission of the church. Let's read verse 20. Paul has been to Corinth twice before: once when he spent a couple of years there and started the church, and when he returned to Corinth a few years later for what he called his "painful visit" which we read about at the beginning of 2 Corinthians. Now Paul is about to make his third visit to Corinth, and he is afraid of what he will find. He writes, "For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder." 2 Corinthians 12:20.

If Paul finds that kind of behavior, it will be proof positive that the church has been led astray and away from the Lord by these teachers.

What does Paul hope to find instead? "Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace ..." 2 Corinthians 13:11a.

When you read one of Paul's letters in the New Testament, if you ever want to find the main point of any particular passage is, look for the commands, where Paul instructs the people on what to do. If you take that approach, you find verse eleven is the heart of this passage.

There are five imperatives in this verse. The first one, "rejoice," while technically an imperative, when used here means something like "farewell." But look at the next four. When Paul gets back to Corinth, he hopes to find a group of people gathered together in the church who "aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, [and] live in peace."

Then Paul writes this at the end of verse 11: "... and the God of love and peace will be with you." Paul could have described God so many different ways. He could have written, "May the God of holiness and justice be with you" or "May the infinite, wise God be with you." In fact, in other places in the New Testament, Paul does so describe God. But at the end of 2 Corinthians, he describes God as he who is "love and peace."

Why is that? *Because the fundamental, foundational, non-negotiable mission of the church is to be a group of people devoted to loving one another and living in peace.*

When you hear “mission of the church,” is that what you think of? Is that what comes to mind or is it something else? For a lot of us, we hear “mission” and think “caring for the poor.” The church to many is a social justice organization, meeting needs of the “least of these among us.” Others hear “mission of the church” and they think “teach God’s Word.” The church is here to make sure people know the Bible. For others the Great Commission comes to mind. Our job is to spread the good news of Jesus Christ all over the world so that all people might believe.

But in John 13:34-35 Jesus said to the disciples, “³⁴ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Please note that Jesus did not say, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, by how you care for the poor, or teach the Word, or how important missions is to you.” **Put another way, you can do all those things and people will not necessarily know you follow Jesus.** He said, “All people all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

God is not glorified when we study the Bible just so we can have an intellectual knowledge of it. In seminaries and universities around the world there are brilliant men and women who knew the Bible far better than I do anyway, but they have abandoned the gospel. They know the Bible, but they don’t believe it and they certainly don’t know God or his power, and it does not please him.

God’s is not necessarily glorified when we care for the poor. Jesus said, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.” Matthew 6:1-2. Jesus says, “God is not honored by giving to the poor like that.”

God is not even glorified just because we give a lot to missions. That can be done just to brag: look at all the missionaries we support. Churches and pastors do that, you know.

Now of course, we must do all of those things but none of those tasks are ends in and of themselves. *In the purest understanding of the mission of the church they are means.*

They are means to the end which brings God the most glory. That end is when a group of sinful, fallen, messed up people, gather themselves into an assembly and decide that in the name of Jesus and by his grace they are, no matter what, going to love one another and live in peace. They are going to do this no matter how different they are or how difficult it gets, and it glorifies God because it is impossible to love like that out of impure motivations.

Paul says that if there’s no love and peace, then no matter what else goes on inside the church ultimately, it’s worthless. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all

mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. Nothing more purely expresses our love for our God than by loving him and loving one another – that’s why it’s the mission of the church.

Second, how do we get there? Paul tells us three things that must happen to fulfill the mission. *First, Paul tells us we must pass the test.* In verse 5 Paul challenges the Corinthians and says, “⁵ Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” What is he talking about? What is this “test” he’s talking about?

A lot of ministers and teachers over the years have taken Paul to mean something like this: if you want to know whether you are in the faith, you must look deep inside of yourself and make sure you believe in Jesus Christ *without any doubts*. In other words, **it’s a subjective test**. They’ve used this verse and gotten up in revival meetings and said, “Do you know that you know that you know that if you died tonight you’d go to heaven? If not, you need to settle it tonight!” And they’d tell you to settle it by raising your hand or getting up out of the pew and coming forward to make a public decision for Christ.

Now it is true that you can know that if you died tonight you’d go to heaven. It’s called the assurance of salvation, but you’ll never get it by only looking in here and examining your feelings to see if you have any doubts about Jesus. If that’s all you do, you’ll go crazy. You won’t find assurance that way, and you certainly won’t settle the matter by raising your hand or walking down front. I tried to do that at one point in my life, like a lot of you, and it didn’t work.

Plus, it’s not really what Paul is talking about here. What then is Paul’s test? Look back up at verse 19: “Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been *speaking in Christ*, and all for your upbuilding, beloved.” 2 Corinthians 12:19.

The test for the Corinthians is do they believe Paul is “speaking in Christ.” In other words, **it’s an objective test**. Do the Corinthians objectively believe Paul is an apostle of Jesus Christ, a designated messenger of God, and that his words are, in fact, God’s Words? The test is not about what they believe about what’s going on in here, but what’s going on when Paul teaches.

Here’s the test for us. It’s similar to the Corinthians’ test, but a bit different because Paul is no longer around physically. Do we objectively believe that the Bible is the Word of God? The test is not about what we believe about what’s going on in here, but what’s going on in when the Bible is read and taught.

Now why is that the test? Why is believing the Bible is God’s Word so important? **Because we will never love one another as we ought until we are certain of who God is and his love for us, and we’ll never know that unless we believe it when we read it in the Bible.** We aren’t born with that knowledge, and we won’t find it in nature. You can be in awe of God when you look at nature, when you look up at a starry night. You can be frightened of him, when you read about the devastation of a tsunami or some dread disease. But you can’t know him or be sure he

loves you just by looking at nature. *It's through reading and teaching the Word of God that we find God loves us, and through that love the church is built.*

As one pastor put it: “We must remember that a crowd doesn’t equal a church. Muslims draw crowds. Disney World attracts millions. So do [our favorite sports teams]. What’s the difference? It’s this: God builds his church by his Word. You can build a crowd on personality [and] marketing, ... but you can only build a church by the Word. God brings us to life through the living Word of God, sustains us by his Word, and matures his people by his Word – as the Spirit works through this divine process.” As Hebrews 4:12 says, “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

So examine yourself: do you pass the test? Do you objectively believe that when the Bible is read God himself speaks to you? That doesn’t mean that you can’t have questions. That doesn’t mean that you have to pretend you understand it all or that you always obey it – I don’t understand it all or always obey. But as a matter of principle, do you hold fast to the Bible as the Word of God? If you do, you’ve passed Paul’s test. That’s the first step.

Paul says the second step to fulfilling the mission of the church is to speak the truth. “²I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them— ³since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me.” 2 Corinthians 13:2-3a. Let’s be honest: Paul sounds harsh. He’s definitely frustrated by what’s gone on in Corinth since his last visit. And this isn’t the only place in the Bible where we read Paul getting worked up.

In the book of Galatians, we read how some false teachers infiltrated the church and taught you cannot follow Jesus unless you first go through the rite of circumcision. When Paul heard that the Galatians started to believe this, he nearly lost it. Or maybe he did lose it, because Paul wrote in Galatians 5:11-12 (NIV 1984): “Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. ¹²As for those agitators [the false teachers], I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” Do you see what Paul is saying? Literally Paul says, “I wish their sharp knives would slip in their hand when they perform this procedure and they would cut off more than they bargained for!”

When we think of a spiritual giant, we think of someone who is always serene and never gets his feathers ruffled and never lets on that anything bothers him. **Paul, though, couldn’t care less what you think of him.** Paul makes us uncomfortable. So we read passages like this and sometimes think, “Why can’t Paul be more like, I don’t know, the Dalai Lama? That guy seems so relaxed and nothing ever seems to bother him.”

The only reason we think that way is we don’t really understand spiritual maturity. We have confused niceness with kindness. Kindness is a fruit of the Spirit; niceness is not.

As one author put it: “‘Niceness’ is a form of superficial kindness that’s used as a means to a selfish end. I identify it as an idol in my life because I have served it tirelessly, and it has served

me well in return. My devotion to it has won me a lot of acceptance and praise, but it has also inhibited my courage, fed my self-righteousness, encouraged my inauthenticity, and produced in me a flimsy sweetness that easily gives way to disdain.”

We are especially bad about this in the church in the South. The last thing many of us want is to get involved in what could possibly become an **awkward conversation**. Therefore, we rarely if ever try to tell the good news of Jesus to those who don’t already believe it, and even with other Christians we are incredibly slow to tell them we disagree with them.

But when we act that way it’s often a sign that we don’t really love people; we merely tolerate them. Toleration allows the other person to hang around, but love seeks the good of the other person, and when you love people you will eventually tell them when they are headed off course.

I came across a great example of this kind of love the other day. A woman named Peggy, a Christian, had a job as an early morning anchor at a local TV station. Obviously, she had to get to sleep very early. But her next-door neighbor, Laura, had a Yorkshire terrier that barked incessantly in the evenings, running along the chain-link fence just outside her bedroom window.

Peggy asked Laura to please take her dog inside at night, but she ignored the request. Months and months went by with no sleep, and Peggy’s resentment began to boil. She lay in bed at night listening to the dog’s shrill bark and imagined all the ways she could silence it. She wrote, “It wasn’t pretty. When I began to fantasize about lacing a juicy steak with poison and dropping it over the fence, my dark passion caught me by surprise. Who was I becoming? This woman who sang in church on Sundays, and on Mondays dreamed up ways to hurt her neighbor’s pet.”

Eventually Peggy filed a noise complaint with the city. The court set a hearing date for Christmas Eve. Laura, in retaliation, baited a trap on her property with Meow Mix, lured Peggy’s tabby cat over the fence, and sent him to the pound.

Peggy wrote, “By the time my husband’s parents arrived for their Christmastime visit, I was obsessed. My in-laws were my heroes and spiritual mentors, so I asked them what they would do about the dog.” Now, what would you say in that situation? I can tell you my default response: be nothing but sympathetic to Peggy. I would probably affirm her in her anger and even scheme with her about how to win her day in court.

But that’s not what her father-in-law did. Instead he said, “Peggy, if you’re going to be a follower of Jesus, you’ll love your enemy, not sue her.” He spoke the truth to her. How many of us love people enough to say something like that, instead of just agreeing with them for the sake of avoiding an **awkward conversation**? Peggy continues, “He was a man who had suffered in a Japanese prisoner of war camp during World War II and had forgiven his brutal captors. Over the years I had seen him epitomize what it looked like to ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’”

So a few days before Christmas Peggy walked next door, apologized to Laura for filing the complaint, and said she wanted to be a better neighbor. A few weeks later, Laura crossed the driveway to knock on Peggy’s door. “You said you wanted to be a good neighbor,” Laura said. “Can I borrow some money for milk for my daughter?” It turns out Laura was a single-mom

who had been wounded many times in her life and who also struggled with mental illness. Peggy lent her the \$20, and a few weeks later Laura paid her back.

Things got better between them, the dog did quit barking, they became friends, and years later Peggy was at her bedside as Laura died. The story ended beautifully. ***But what would the outcome have been if Peggy's father-in-law hadn't been willing to contradict her?*** We must be kind always, but it's not Christian to be nice. Instead, we must speak the truth.

Third, we must trust God's power. "He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. ⁴For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God." 2 Corinthians 13:3b-4a.

No one ever mistook Jesus for being a strong man. He was homeless, he was poor, he was opposed by all the authorities, and the culmination of his ministry was him hanging on a Roman cross. Dying that kind of despised death was the ultimate sign of human weakness.

But through that weakness the power of God came into the world. We deserve to be punished for our sins, but Jesus took it for us. He is dead for us, and if you will only believe that you need Jesus to die for you and that he in fact did die for you, you are reconciled to God. As proof that Jesus' death accomplished that for you, God raised him from the dead and now verse four tells us Jesus lives by the power of God.

"For we also **are weak in him**, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God." 2 Corinthians 13:4b. When you're in a church, especially when you're the pastor of a church, you know what makes you feel strong? Starting a new program. Launch a new worship service, a new evangelism campaign, bring in guest speakers, or organize a new ministry in the community. It feels like you're doing something and being productive. You've got things to announce and put in the bulletin and people can see how busy and hard-working you are.

But no one feels strong when they are trying are to love their neighbor and live in peace. You can't really talk about it, there's nothing to announce, no numbers you can report. It makes you feel weak.

But the gospel always works like that: in weakness, in secrecy. One of my favorite parables of Jesus in the gospels is the one about the seed that grows secretly. ²⁶And [Jesus] said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. ²⁷He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; **he knows not how** [it's a secret to the man]. ²⁸The earth produces **by itself**, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear." Mark 4:26-28.

We have programs at Grace, of course. Once there are more than twenty people in a church you have to have programs, and there's nothing wrong with them. **But we know the power of God does not lie in our programs.** So we try to keep the programming to a bare minimum so the believers in the assembly can focus on the mission: to scatter lots of seeds of love and peace.

It rarely seems like much at first, but it has all the power. And over time the seeds grow and you have the kind of assembly, or church, which is mighty in love and good deeds, the kind of church about which Jesus said the gates of hell cannot prevail against, one that truly glorifies God.

PRAY