

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
June 10, 2018

Leave Blessed

2 Corinthians 13:1-14

Last Sunday, I preached about the Holy Spirit's work of testifying to Jesus. In other words, a key part of the Holy Spirit's job is to draw attention to Jesus rather than to himself. It only makes sense, then, that someone who has received the Holy Spirit will be doing the same thing, namely, speaking and acting in ways that point away from self and toward Jesus.

When Bible scholar N. T. Wright was asked what he would tell his children on his deathbed, he replied, "Look at Jesus." Wright explained, saying:

The [Person] who walks out of [the pages of the Gospels] to meet us is just central and irreplaceable. He is always a surprise. We never have Jesus in our pockets. He is always coming at us from different angles If you want to know who God is, look at Jesus. If you want to know what it means to be human, look at Jesus. If you want to know what love is, look at Jesus. And go on looking until you're not just a spectator, but part of the drama that has him as the central character.¹

Though Jesus is the central character, we also affirm that there are other players involved. I've already mentioned the Holy Spirit. Between Jesus and the Holy Spirit, we already have two-thirds of one of Christianity's deepest and most challenging affirmations about God, the doctrine of the Trinity.

Saint Augustine was one of the great theologians, as well as a bishop, in the early church. The story is told that shortly after finishing his book called *On the Trinity*, he was walking along the Mediterranean shore on the coast of North Africa when he came upon a boy who kept filling a bucket with seawater and pouring it into a large hole in the sand. "Why are you doing that?" Augustine asked the boy. "I'm pouring the Mediterranean Sea into the hole," the boy replied in all seriousness. "My dear boy, what an impossible thing to try to do!" chided Augustine. "The sea is far too vast, and your hole is far too small." Then as Augustine continued his walk, it dawned on him that in his efforts to write on the Trinity he was much like that boy: the subject was far too vast, and his mind was far too small!

In some way or other, every attempt to explain the Trinity or make it manageable falls short. It always has been, and always will be, impossible for any of us to wrap our brains fully around this fundamental yet perplexing Christian conviction. As preacher David H. C. Read has pointed out, when one of the early Christian creeds speaks of "'The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible' the modern mind has been tempted to add 'and the whole thing incomprehensible.'"²

However incomprehensible the doctrine of the Trinity may be, I do believe the Scriptures give us solid ground for relating to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And for some people, that ground includes this morning's Scripture passage from 2 Corinthians. Specifically, I'm referring to the last verse, where Paul says, "May the grace of the Lord

Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (v. 14).

At first glance, this verse looks like it's tailor made for a sermon on the Trinity. After all, Paul is clearly speaking in threes: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Surely he has in mind what we now refer to as the Trinity.

Well, yes and no. First of all, we need to remember that the Bible never uses the actual words "Trinity" or "Trinitarian" to speak about God. These are terms that came along later as the church developed and clarified its convictions about how God is one yet exists as three persons. But even though the Bible doesn't contain an explicit doctrine of the Trinity, it does contain the raw materials for this doctrine. In other words, the early Christians whose witness is recorded in the Scriptures reflected on and wrote about how they had experienced God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, before other believers eventually sat down and used these writings to hammer out a specific doctrine called the Trinity.

So when Paul closes his letter to the Corinthians with a three part blessing, he's not saying, "Okay, before I sign off, don't forget what we taught you about the Trinity. Remember, it goes like this: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. When I finally arrive in Corinth to visit you face to face, there will be a quiz on this doctrine." That's not Paul's thinking or purpose at the end of today's Scripture passage.

What, then, is his thinking and purpose? If he's not trying to drive home a point about the Trinity, what is he trying to do? The best way to answer that question is to remember where we're at in this letter. Our primary verse is the conclusion, Paul's closing word. But it's no ordinary goodbye. It's actually a final blessing, what we often call a benediction. When we think of benediction, we often think of the last item in the Sunday morning order of worship. The announcements are done, your hymnal is back in the rack, you've gathered up your bulletins and other papers and stuck them in your Bible. It's almost time to open the sanctuary doors and send you forth into the world.

That doesn't mean the benediction is like the final bell signaling that school is out. It's actually much more. The benediction doesn't just dismiss you. It dismisses you with a blessing. As you prepare to go forth to active ministry in the world, you are sent out with a blessing. It's important that you leave here blessed. Sometimes the benediction is primarily a prayer. Other times it's more my word of blessing directly to you. In cases where I'm directly blessing you, I may even have my arms raised. Some of you may have your eyes open and some of you may have your eyes closed. Some of you may have one eye open and one eye closed, or at least you open and close your eyes intermittently. The benediction can feel like part prayer and part blessing, thus throwing us off about exactly how to respond.

This is certainly in keeping with Paul's last word for the Corinthians. He's certainly blessing them. But he's also telling them what he wants for them, what he hopes for them, what he prays for them. First and foremost, he prays that they will know and experience the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. What better place to start. After all, that's what the entire Christian life hinges on, God's grace. By grace, we mean God's unmerited, freely bestowed gift of salvation, God's choice to engage with us for our deliverance and restoration. Grace means that God is the one who took the initiative to reconcile us to himself, to forgive our sins and set us free for new life under a new Lord. Grace is what encompasses every moment in the life of a believer. When it comes to life in Christ, grace is the beginning and the end, and everything in between. Without grace, there is no Christian life to speak of.

But notice that Paul doesn't just speak of it as God's grace. He also associates this grace with Christ. He calls it the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's because Jesus Christ is the way that God has acted, fully and decisively, to reconcile us to himself. In other words, God's grace is embodied and made effective in Christ, most of all in his death and resurrection. It is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, it's not unusual for Paul to close his letters by blessing his hearers with the grace of Christ (e.g., Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 16:23). What's unusual here in 2 Corinthians is that Paul takes his closing blessing and expands it. He says, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God. . . ." So just when some of the Corinthians thought the benediction was over and were ready to open their eyes, Paul stretches it out and says just a little more.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God. . . . As I said, grace is crucial, because it means that God has first reached out to us, undeserving as we are, with peace and reconciliation. But Paul also knows that there is something, or better yet someone, behind the grace of Christ, and that is, the love of God. The grace that takes the form of Jesus originates in God's love for the world, for each of us. This divine love isn't primarily a warm, fuzzy feeling that God has toward us. It primarily his faithfulness to what he has made, and his commitment to redeem what he has made, rebellious, broken, and fallen as we are. This includes God's holiness, his wrath, and his judgment on our sin. But in that judgment is his mercy, his desire to restore us and to make us right with himself. In other words, his unending love.

Trace the grace of Jesus Christ back to its source, and you'll find God. Earlier in his letter, Paul says, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation" (5:18-19).

So Paul tells the Corinthians, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God. . . ." Surely now he's ready to dismiss them and send them forth. Some of them can already taste that Sunday lunch buffet. But hold on, we're not quite done yet. Paul draws a breath and adds one more thing to his benediction. "And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit." This is an ambiguous expression. In one respect, it can refer to the close personal relationship that each believer experiences with the Holy Spirit. But it can also refer to the fellowship among believers that the Holy Spirit creates and fosters.

The term translated as "fellowship" is the Greek word *koinonia*. By the way, some of you may have seen that *koinonia* was the winning word in this year's national spelling bee. The champion speller, Karthik Nemmani, who beat out more than 500 fellow spellers, said that he knew the spelling of the final word as soon as the official pronouncer read it. No doubt the word rang familiar to many Christian viewers as well. It has been used to name congregations, worship bands, youth groups, and various other ministries. The word means fellowship, communion, or partnership.

Paul wants the Corinthians to experience the fellowship generated by the Holy Spirit, the sense of connection and partnership that they're supposed to have with God and with one another. I say supposed to have because the situation among the Corinthians was far from ideal. Paul's letters reveal that he was regularly dealing with divisions in the congregation, as well as hostility toward himself.

I have a book on 2 Corinthians with an interesting picture on the cover. It's a drawing of Paul, standing before the Corinthians, ministering the gospel to them. But most of them are shaking their fists at him. It seems like an accurate portrayal of his experience with this particular church. Many in the congregation rejected his authority. They opposed his style of ministry. They criticized both what he preached and how he preached it.

And yet, here at the end of his most personal letter, Paul still blesses them, all of them. They all stand on the same ground as people who belong to God and to one another. Paul knows that God the Father was in Jesus the Son, making peace, and that the Holy Spirit takes that peace and makes it visible in the form of the church. So Paul blesses them and prays three things for them: grace, love, and fellowship. They're three separate things. Yet they're also one, because where you find one of them you'll usually find the others. Grace, love, and fellowship—three things that I should rightly pray for you, and that you should pray for one another. Three things with which God has blessed us, and with which we should bless one another. Three things with which we should bless the world, as you go from this place—blessed.

¹ Quoted in Marlin Watling, *The Marriage of Heaven and Earth* (CreateSpace: 2016) 129.

² David H. C. Read, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Walker and Company, 1985) 155-56.