

## What We Should Want for Each Other 2 Corinthians 13:5-14

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*have been very useful for work at Haddington House and also with MT3 in partner colleges overseas. It is our pleasure to have our opening sermon in this year's Journal by Dr. Olyott since his work is well known by many of our students both here and abroad. It is anticipated that he will be offering guest lectures in October, 2006, at Haddington House. The sermon selected by permission here was preached in 1998 to his congregation in Liverpool, England.*

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Olyott, *Ministering Like the Master: Three Messages for Today's Preachers* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003).

Stuart Olyott, *Preaching pure and simple* (Bryntirion, Bridgend: Bryntirion Press, 2005).

Our passage this morning is 2 Corinthians chapter 13 verse 5 to the end of the letter.

2 Cor. 13:5-14 (NKJV)

<sup>5</sup> Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Prove yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you are disqualified. <sup>6</sup> But I trust that you will know that we are not disqualified. <sup>7</sup> Now I pray to God that you do no evil, not that we should appear approved, but that you should do what is honorable, though we may seem disqualified. <sup>8</sup> For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth. <sup>9</sup> For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. And this also we pray, that you may be made complete. <sup>10</sup> Therefore I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness, according to the authority which the Lord has given me for edification and not for destruction.

<sup>11</sup> Finally, brethren, farewell. Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. <sup>12</sup> Greet one another with a holy kiss.

<sup>13</sup> All the saints greet you. <sup>14</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost be with you all. Amen.

When you write a letter, especially if you're writing a letter of this length, you probably get quite tired near the end. Hence the letter fades out really, whereas this letter comes almost to a climax – so different from our letters. So Paul is drawing his letter to this troubled church to an end. Why is it a troubled church? Well, actually, relationships between Paul and the Corinthians are very strained. Now, the Corinthians feel very let down. Paul had promised them a visit and he hadn't come, and they felt that he was shallow and a man who didn't keep his word. And then of course there were these false teachers who had come among them, and a good portion of the church was thinking that Paul wasn't really a minister of the Gospel anyway. So that's why he's written this long letter – thirteen chapters of it. He's talked about all sorts of things. He's explained at some length why he was delayed in coming. He's talked about his great joy because a moral problem in the church was at last sorted out. He's talked to them about the collection of money which they had to send to the Jewish Christians in Palestine because they were so poor. And he spent a lot of time talking

about these “super apostles,” so called, who had come into the church. And now he draws his letter to a close. How is he going to end this letter? After all the different subjects he’s touched on, what will he actually choose to say as he brings the letter to a close? Well, he’s going to talk about three subjects, because there are three things that he wants for the Corinthians, and these are the things he wants ringing in their ears as the letter is closed. Remember, most people won’t have read the letter. It would have been read to the church, perhaps several times. What does he want to be echoing in their mind as the letter ends?

First of all he will talk about **assurance**. That will be in verses 5 and 6. Then he will talk about **growth**. That’s in verses 7-10. Then he will talk about **fellowship** in verses 11 to 13. This leaves one verse at the end. Then he will finish with a **benediction** which actually draws those three threads together so that these three things are left there, ringing away in their memories as the letter closes.

**Let’s talk about assurance**, verses 5 and 6. Let’s give all our attention to that now. Paul will not take it for granted that every church member in Corinth is a true Christian. And really, ladies and gentlemen, you’re skating on very thin ice if you take it for granted that because you are a church member you’re a Christian. We hope you are. We pray that you are. But there is no infallible connection between church membership and being a true Christian. And many of you aren’t church members. You should be, but you are not. But you attend the church regularly. You love the Scriptures. You’re really very much part and parcel of this body. You’re really very, very foolish if you think that because you are a regular church attender and Bible lover, that you are necessarily a Christian.

So he calls them in verse 5 to examination. Why? Well, when you examine something, it’s because it is possible to know. You pass a driver’s examination because it is possible to know whether someone is a competent driver. You might do a language examination because it’s possible to know whether people have got to a certain standard of fluency and understanding. And there is an examination here for every professing Christian, because it is possible to know whether you’re a true believer or not. That’s the purpose of the examination. But it is an examination. Sometimes at work your boss may say to you, “Just cast your eye over this.” What he means is, “Read it quickly.” But sometimes he’ll say to you, “Examine this,” and what he means is you are now to have a good look at it, thoroughly. You take your time. You weigh it up. Nothing hurried now. Nothing shallow or superficial. You have a really good, hard look. And Paul is saying to these Corinthians and the Word of God is saying through the same passage to me and to

everyone here, “Have a thorough, hard look.” It’s not that the pastor is examining you. It’s not that the elders are examining you. It’s not that husband is examining wife or that parents are examining children. Verse 5 – examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Prove yourselves. Test yourselves.

This last summer with one or two people present here I went to Wales’ only working gold mine. At one point in the tour we were given a hammer and chisel and told to chisel out of the rock. We had so many minutes to try and mine a piece of gold. I was actually quite pleased with the pieces of rock I was able to put in my bag, because they were actually quite shiny and they looked like the genuine article to me. But once we got out into the open air and the man who knows about these things put his eyes on them, he knew that it wasn’t gold. It was fool’s gold. So you know what I felt that I was! It looked so, so real and I thought that this had more than paid for the price of the entry ticket, but it didn’t. Then we went about to pan, and you could pan this water with



all these stones in it. You could see real gold and they could tell you that it was real gold, but how to get it out was another story. Most of it wasn’t real, you see. It wasn’t. And a great deal of Christianity isn’t real. It looks so real; it’s so convincing.

You’re so sure. It looks obvious. But Paul is saying, “Test yourselves.”

The word he uses in verse 5, “prove yourselves” is actually the word used by a metallurgist to examine a metal. Take a real, hard, thorough, if necessary, hurtful look to see whether you are in the faith. The Bible tells us how to do that of course. In the New Testament we have a picture of Christians. Your life gives a picture. Is the picture of your life exactly the same as the picture of a Christian which is found in the New Testament? In the New Testament a Christian is someone who has faith in Christ. In other words, when they pray, they expect God to hear them – not because they’re praying, not because they’re good, not because they’re sincere. Not because they’re regular. Not because they’re needy. But they expect God to hear them because Christ died for sinners. Is that what you rely on for your acceptance with God? Not

your need. Not your sincerity. Certainly not your religion. Not your prayers. Do you rely on Christ for your acceptance with God?

In the New Testament, a Christian is someone who loves other Christians because they are others who have come to God through Christ, crucified and risen. Because of this we stand in a unique relationship with them. They're not always easy, they're not always right. But we love them because they have the same faith, the same Lord, the same experience of salvation, the same destination. Your heart goes out to other Christians in a way that it doesn't even go out to family members. Do you have that mark?

In the New Testament, a Christian is someone who loves God's laws. He doesn't keep them perfectly, but he wants to. He attempts to keep them but never manages it. But he can say, "I delight in the law of God in my inward heart, in my inward being. Deep down inside me I love God's instructions." Paul is saying, "Examine yourself. Take the time. Have a close look. It's worth doing." You know why? Because one day we come to the moment of our death, at which time, by the way, we may not have time to reflect. But if we do have time to reflect, what a terrible thing to be on the brink of eternity and not to be sure that when my eyelids close in death I'll be carried by the holy angels to be with Christ immediately, which is far better. What a terrible thing in that moment of dying to be in doubt. What a terrible thing not to be sure that sin has been pardoned, to be unsure that you have eternal life, to have some real uncertainty about whether you will hear the voice of Christ welcoming you.

And so the apostle Paul is saying, "Examine yourselves. Prove yourselves. Do you not know yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you, unless indeed you are disqualified?" Do you think, Corinthians, do you think, readers, that it is possible to have Jesus Christ inside you and not know it? Is it possible for the Holy Spirit to make real the Son of God so that His life is inside your life, and you could be completely unaware of it? Is that possible? Obviously it's not possible. Therefore it is possible to know that you're a true Christian. It is possible to be sure that the Son of God is living His life inside your life. Unless, of course, he says you fail the test. For he says, "But I trust you know that we are not disqualified." What does he mean by that? He means that when I become sure of my own salvation, when by the grace of God I recognize that I have faith in Christ, when I see the marks of love towards other Christians, when I see the desire to obey the law of God, when I see that the change really has taken place, when I see that there is another life inside my life that is not a natural life, but a supernatural, spiritual life, when I see that there is a Christness about what happened

to me, then of course I become more spiritually discerning. And when I see a man like Paul, I recognize him for what he is, a true minister of the gospel. And when I look at these false apostles, I recognize them for what they are – Satan, come as an angel of light. Spiritual discernment is intimately linked to assurance, which is one of the other reasons why he's pressing this point upon them. He's saying, if you come to know that you are Christians and you can see that you don't fail the test, then you will know that we don't fail the test either. You will see things as they really are. You will stop being one of these people who is so easily hoodwinked. So his first subject as he closes is assurance.

**Paul's second subject is growth.** We're now in verses 7 to 10. "I'm praying for you," he says. That statement in verse 7 is actually surprising. Paul was very disappointed, wasn't he, in the Corinthians? He had led them to Christ, and some of them were even doubting if he was an apostle. Some of them were even doubting whether he was a Christian – yet they owed their spiritual life to his ministry. He was very disappointed in them. They were saying all sorts of despicable things about him. But he hadn't stopped loving them. The less he was loved, the more he did love. And he prayed. He tells them in verse 7 and in verse 9 that he's praying for them.

Are you going to take the lesson to heart this morning? Maybe there's a Christian in the church or a group of Christians who have disappointed you terribly. I don't know. Do you pray for them? What did you pray, Paul? Well, look at verse 7. "I pray to God that you do no evil." Hmmm. Try to think of a Christian who does no evil. What would he or she be like? What would a Christian teenager be like who did no evil? What would the Christian father be like who did no evil? What would the Christian wife be like who did no evil? What would any Christian be like who did no evil? "That's what I'm praying," says Paul.

Now the Scripture is quite clear that we will never come to the point where we are sinless. But is that our great ambition – for all of us? Paul says, "It's our personal ambition for ourselves and it's our ambition for other Christians and I'm praying, I'm praying, I'm praying that you won't do any evil. You've done plenty already. You've accepted false teachers when you shouldn't have done. You've rejected true teachers when you shouldn't have done. There's immorality among you which you tolerated for years before you did anything about it. There's all sorts of bickering and quarreling. There's slowness to give to Christians in need. There are all sorts of things which I've spoken to you about and I'm praying that it will all be cleared up."

This is why he prays at the end of verse 9, “And this also we pray, that you may be made complete;” or as it is in Greek, “And this also we pray, that you may be mended.” The verb he uses is the verb James and John used in Mark 1:19 – to mend their nets. Think of two fishermen mending their nets, but there’s a hole here, there’s a fault there. There’s something that needs to be put right here and put straight there and un-



tangled there, and they put the whole thing in order. They sort it out. “I’m praying, I’m praying that you do no evil. I’m praying that you’ll be mended, that you’ll sort out these things in your Christian life that are a let-down, that are a disappointment, which are a fault. I’m praying that you’ll sort it out, that you’ll deal with it,” says Paul. What an unselfish man Paul is. Verse 7: “I pray to God that you do no evil; not that we should appear approved, but that you should do what is honourable though we may seem disqualified.” Paul says, “I want you to be sinless Christians, not just so that you’ll think right thoughts about us, not just so that you’ll recognize us as men of God and the ministers that we are. Even if we seem disqualified, even if we seem completely out of order, I’m praying so much that you’ll become sinless Christians.”

Look at the integrity of Paul, verse 8. “What I do, I do. I have to do it the way I’ve done because I can’t do anything against the truth, but for the truth. I can’t alter my public image just to please you. I can’t change the sort of ministry that I exercise just to be more acceptable to you Corinthians. The truth is the truth, and I can’t act against it.”

Look at verse 9, the humility of Paul. “Even if you continue to consider us weak, I’m so glad if you’re spiritually strong.” Look at the restraint of Paul, verse 10. “I could come to Corinth on the bounce. I’m an apostle of Jesus Christ. I could slay you with my tongue. I could put you all in place, but I’m not going to. That’s the authority I’ve got, but I’m not going to use it that way. The authority which God has given me is not for your destruction, not to put anybody down. The authority which God has given me is to build people up. That’s why I’m writing to you first, and then I’m going to visit you second.” That also is a very

salutary lesson, isn't it? Any capacity, any ability, any spiritual gift that God's given us is to be used for the building up of people, not for putting them down. Sharpness is to be avoided if it can be avoided. If it can't be avoided, it's not to be misinterpreted as a sign of animosity or lack of love. But by and large, the way of the Christian church, with exceptions as Paul has shown us, is not to be the way of sharpness. All the time the burning desire is that everyone will grow in holiness, and we will do our bit to help them, and we hope that they will do their bit to help us. Growth in Paul is not just an individual thing. It's something that churches must do together.

So he's talked about assurance and he's talked about growth. And **now he talks about fellowship**. Look at verses 11, 12, and 13. These Christians, they've been so bitter towards him, but he writes, "Finally, brothers, goodbye, farewell." Brothers are people who have been conceived by the same love. Brothers are people who have come out of the same womb. Christians, fellow-Christians, have been conceived by the same eternal love. They've been born again by the same Holy Spirit. That is the actual relationship we have with fellow-Christians. That relationship is a fact, whatever we may feel about it. And Paul never loses sight of the fact, even in the emotion of all the disappointment of the Corinthian situation. This is an expression of fellowship already, just to recognize every Christian brother and sister as a brother and sister in Christ. "Become complete," he says. "Be mended. You've got a choice to make. Here are all these holes in your Christian life. Sort them out. Here are these tangles. Deal with them. That's a choice you've got to make."

Then he goes on, "Be of good comfort." In other words, be an encouragement to one another. Be of one mind. Think the same thoughts. Live in peace. Don't be looking for face to face confrontations. That's worth doing, isn't it. But how to do it? How can a congregation like this one, for example, be of one mind? How can we actually think the same thoughts? Well there are two ways in history – a wrong way and a right way. The wrong way is the way of the cults, where you get a strong personality who speaks more strongly than anyone else, and everybody's made to conform. They're of one mind, but actually it's not the mind of Christ. Or there's the way of Scripture, by which Scripture is presented for what it is, the sole authority for all matters of faith, practice, and experience, and we submit our thoughts to Scripture. We drink of the same fountain, we read the same Book, we put into practice the same instruction. We keep coming back to the same infallible voice of God which speaks in the page until our minds are getting more and more molded, more and more molded, more and

more molded into the patterns of thought which the Scripture has. Then we become of one mind. And then of course we live in peace fairly easily, because our mind is the mind of Christ Jesus. And then the end of verse 11 happens, “And the God of love and peace will be with you.”

Imagine a congregation obeying verse 11. Everybody treats every true Christian as a brother. Everybody is sorting out his own Christian life. Everybody is working for the encouragement of the others. Everybody is submitting their thoughts to Scripture. Everybody is deliberately trying not to be difficult. And the God of love and peace will be with you. There’s a sense of God and the love of God and the peace of God which would not otherwise be experienced. That is fellowship!

“So,” says Paul, “start right now. Greet one another with a holy kiss.” Does that apply today? You wouldn’t embarrass me unduly. It is a bit unhygienic. Some cultures do it. But the principle is clear, isn’t it? Greet one another. Everybody should speak to one another and not to do so is already disobedience to the Word of God. That’s clear, isn’t it? We can’t get around that. Greet one another. So a Christian who does not attempt to speak to all the others is already running foul of verse 12. We’ve all got to speak to everybody, and that is as much in the Bible as “Do not steal.” Greet another with a *holy* kiss. The whole purpose therefore is their spiritual good. It’s a warm, affectionate, spiritual greeting. We’re all trying to get to know everybody, because we’re all concerned about the spiritual advancement of every single person in the fellowship.

But Christian fellowship goes beyond the local church, verse 13. “All the saints greet you.” “Here I am,” says Paul. “I’m writing to you from Macedonia in northern Greece. I’m writing to you down there in Achaia in southern Greece. There are Christians all around me and you’re a few hundred miles away. But they still feel this great sense of belonging. So as this letter goes through the post, they all want to send their greetings to you as well. To remind you that you and they are all part of the same body of Christ, they send you their greetings as well.” It’s all about fellowship.

So assurance, growth, fellowship. Now we come to **verse 14, which is his great summary**. It’s used to dismiss school assemblies. It’s used at the end of Christian worship services. It’s nearly always misquoted. It says, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion or fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.” It doesn’t say “evermore” and where on earth that apocryphal edition came from who will ever know? That’s the evangelical

Apocrypha. What does Paul say? “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. This is what I want for every one of you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Oh, Corinthians, Corinthians, Corinthians, I want every one of you, every one of you to be saved, to experience the grace of God in the gospel. Oh, therefore, examine yourselves, examine yourselves, examine yourselves until you come to Christ, until you come to the place of Christian assurance. But that’s what I want for you – God’s grace in Christ.” And notice he speaks of Christ before he speaks of God the Father and the Holy Spirit, because we always come to God through Christ. If we haven’t come to God through Christ, we haven’t come to God. “You’re not saved by works,” says Paul. “You’re saved by Christ’s kindness. May every one of you experience it.” He wants everyone to be saved and to know it.

“And the love of God ... be with you all.” What does he mean there? “Some of you are walking the paths of bereavement, some the paths of illness, some of you the paths of unemployment. Some of you are walking the path of tremendous uncertainty about the future. Some of you are walking the path of difficulties with others. Some of you are walking the path of anxiety, deep anxiety sometimes, which you can’t share. But it’s my desire for you,” says Paul, “that you should know that God loves you, even in all these situations, that you should be aware of the love of God, that you should have that consciousness of the love of God, which of course is the consciousness of a maturing, growing Christian. And that the love of God should be answered in your life by – the love of God – that whatever else you love in the world, you should love Him.”

So, you’re aware that He loves you and therefore you love Him. You’re conscious in all your difficult circumstances that it’s all part of a plan. He loves you, so you love Him in return. That’s Christian growth, isn’t it? How else could we describe it? And “the communion, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” The word communion in Greek can also mean communication. So as we read the Scriptures, Paul wants us to have spiritual experiences. As we pray, he wants us to have spiritual meetings with God. As we meet with each other, he wants it to be a spiritual experience. He wants there to be a holy spirit about our lives and fellowship with each other which is brought about by *the* Holy Spirit. He wants those bonds of Christian affection to be strengthened and for them to be spiritual bonds, not just natural bonds, not just temperamental bonds, not just bonds built on the fact that you’re a similar age or come from the same educational strata or a similar social background. But he wants them to be the bonds

which are forged in heaven and which are the fruit of the gospel and which are brought into our lives by the Holy Spirit.

“Those are the things I’m praying for you,” Paul says. “This is my deepest desire for each one of you.” And that’s what we should want for each other. But is it? As we leave the Corinthian epistle, we have to ask the question, then, don’t we, “What am I actually doing to bring about these things?” Can you name it? Can you be specific about what you’re doing to bring these things about in your life and the lives of others? Can you put your finger on it and concretely declare what your action is, by God’s grace?