

Final Greetings

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[0 : 00] I'm going to begin with some advice to anyone who struggles with essays.! Every essay that you write in university should follow the same pattern.

! In your introduction, say what you're going to say. In the main body of your essay, say it. And in your conclusion, say what you've said.

Say what you're going to say, say it, and say what you've said. Now, 1 Corinthians is a letter, it's not an essay, and yet the same pattern follows.

In the introduction to 1 Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 1 verses 1 through 3, the Apostle Paul, in seed form, says what he's going to say. And then in 1 Corinthians 1 verse 3 to 16 verse 8, he says it.

And then in his conclusion from these verses, 1 Corinthians 16, 19 through 24, again in seed form, he says what he said.

[1 : 05] Everything in the body of this letter is an expansion of the themes summarized in both the introduction and in the conclusion. So, in good essay fashion, I want to say what I'm going to say from this conclusion under three headings.

Peace from Christ, love to Christ, and grace from Christ. Peace from Christ, love to Christ, and grace from Christ.

And these three great themes are in seed form a summary of all of Paul's teaching in this letter. If we understand and practice these things, we'll be well on our way to avoiding the imperfections of this early church in Corinth, and well on our way to being a worthy reflection of the perfect Christ who is our Lord and Savior.

So, first of all then, peace from Christ, peace from Christ. This section is largely governed, as you'll see, by greetings.

The word greetings or greet is used five times. The word Paul uses doesn't reflect formality like two businessmen shake hands over a negotiating table.

[2 : 24] It's more warm exchange, friendly acclaim. They are open-hearted greetings. They are the expression of love and warm desire for the good of the other.

And what I find fascinating about these greetings is that they remind us that the early church was not an institution. It was a family made up of thousands of people.

It wasn't dominated by structures which became more important than the individuals themselves.

Church structures are necessary, but they must serve us, not the other way around.

Church is individual Christians and the family of Christ, not institution. Church is individual Christians and the family of Christ. Well, in our passage, there are three groups of greetings.

Christians from different churches, Christians from the same church, and Christians in leadership.

And what's remarkable about all these greetings is that, as we've seen, the early church in Corinth wasn't just imperfect.

[3 : 37] It was a moral, spiritual, and theological mess. I think I'm the only person to use the word burach in this series.

These greetings are an expression of peace from Christ. These Corinthians are being warmly greeted by other Christians, even though they were a mess.

And perhaps that's a good model for how we should relate to fellow Christians who are struggling with moral and spiritual issues. But we'd love them to return to Christ. Love them back to Jesus.

Love them back to Jesus. Continue to offer them peace from Christ. So there are Christians, first of all, from different churches, from different churches.

Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians while in Ephesus, modern-day western Turkey. In Roman times, this was called Asia.

[4 : 45] There were many churches in that area, including Ephesus and Colossae and Smyrna. And all of these churches were aware of the church in Corinth, on the western side of modern-day Macedonia.

And so they sent greetings. Each of these churches had its own problems. And yet they recognized that even though Corinth was very far away, it was made up of brothers and sisters in Christ, believing the same truths about Jesus, saved by the same cross of Jesus, and empowered by the same spirit of Jesus.

So all these Asian churches then are sending greetings to the church in Corinth. They are expressing the peace of Christ to this very messy, very imperfect church.

It's a good practice for how churches as a whole should recognize and greet other churches. In our Presbyterian system in the Free Church of Scotland, every year we send greetings to sister denominations all over the world, from America to Australia, from Africa to mainland Europe. Forming links between different churches encourages everyone, especially those churches which are struggling. We to them, and they to us, we extend the peace of Christ.

[6 : 11] We greet each other. But Paul here in verse 19 highlights the greeting, greetings extended from a very special couple, Aquila and Prisca or Priscilla.

We're going to come back to them in an evening service in April. So I don't want to say too much about them tonight other than that they were a remarkable Christian couple who had spent years in Corinth prior to moving to Ephesus and had worked very hard in the church there.

They would have had very fond memories of time spent in warm fellowship with these Corinthian Christians. By sending their greetings, the Corinthians are able to put faces to names.

Oh yes, we remember Aquila and Priscilla. And the memories of the faithfulness of Aquila and Priscilla would perhaps spur the Corinthian Christians to aspire to the same faithfulness and earnestness in serving Jesus that Aquila and Priscilla have.

It's a very special thing to receive greetings from Christians who once worshipped with us and were part of our family, but who because of work or some other reason had to move away.

[7 : 24] It reminds us, does it not, of special times of fellowship and service together and spurs us on to continue the work they started. And we too must remember that even if we move away, we must not completely cut ties, but rather take every opportunity to pass the peace from Christ to our former congregations.

And then Paul says, all the brothers send you greetings. All the brothers send you greetings. Paul was seldom alone. He always traveled with a band of fellow missionaries.

Some are named in this letter, like Apollos and Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, his fellow workers, his brothers. One can imagine that group of missionaries sharing concerns and praying with each other for the various churches in which they work.

One of the great ways to develop an affection for a church is to pray for it. And these missionaries prayed for the church in Corinth. We do likewise when we pray for other churches.

We learn more about them, the issues that they're facing. And in so doing, we want to take every opportunity to pass our greetings to them. The Corinthian church was not alone in its struggle against its imperfections.

[8 : 51] Its imperfections. Others were standing with them in that struggle, praying for them, passing on to them peace from Christ.

We do not practice isolationism in the church. Rather, we are intimately connected as brothers and sisters between churches and over great distances.

We must, therefore, make it our practice as often as possible to greet other churches in whatever form that takes and in so doing to extend to them peace from Christ.

So Christians from other churches. Then Christians in the same church are to greet one another.

Christians in the same church. One of the problems of the church in Corinth was its disunity.

Factions brought about through pride divided Christian from Christian. And these divisions may have been across economic lines, the rich, the poor. Across ecclesiastical lines, some favored one preacher, some another.

[9 : 56] Even spiritual lines, some with supernatural tongue, gifts like tongues or prophecy, and others with more mundane gifts. But there was division between the Christians in Corinth.

That's why Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 13, his masterpiece of love. But these divisions are also the reason Paul commands the Corinthians to greet one another with a holy kiss.

Kiss. Greet one another with a holy kiss. The holy kiss, whatever that was, was a mark of affection between Christians at that time.

It's very difficult to hate someone you're kissing. I don't know much about this, but I know that I don't hate Katharine when I kiss her. That holy kiss was designed to break down barriers of mistrust and division between Christians in the same church.

It's really difficult to be cliquy when we're commanded to greet those outside our clique with such a token of affection. So, master is to greet slave with a holy kiss and vice versa.

[11:08] Rich are to greet poor with a holy kiss and vice versa. It's a recognition of our fundamental oneness as Christians. And as we kiss one another, we pass to each other peace from Christ.

Now, in our culture, we really don't do kissing. So, don't expect me to stand at the back door and give you all holy kisses. Now, perhaps we're in the wrong. Maybe, though, we just need to find some other way of expressing our fundamental oneness with each other.

Shaking hands may be one such, although shaking hands can be rather formal rather than an affectionate action, a way of keeping someone at arm's length.

I'm not a hugger, I have to be honest. But perhaps that's a good way of expressing oneness between Christians who formally disagreed with each other.

Whatever that gesture, we want to pass peace from Christ to each other here. We want to greet one another here. But then there's also greetings from Christians in leadership.

[12:25] Christians in leadership. The Apostle Paul, you know, he spoke his letters and one of his fellow missionaries wrote them down. He dictated his letters and one of his fellow missionaries wrote them down.

In this case, the writer was a man called Sosthenes. But Paul always wrote in his own handwriting the last few verses. And that's why in verse 21 he says, I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.

You know, it's amazing to think that even though Paul knew all the dirty secrets in this church and all the ways in which they were messing up and all the ways in which they were miscalling him, he still sends them greetings.

He doesn't write them off, have nothing to do with them. He continues to treat them as fellow Christians and he wants to pass on to them peace from Christ.

He still recognizes them as a true Christian church even though they're not acting like one. He still recognizes that the Holy Spirit is at work in them and that they want to worship Christ.

[13:33] even though they at times seem to want to reject his leadership and follow others, he doesn't reject them. He still loves them.

His last words to them after all are, my love be with you all in Christ Jesus. He can't forget the time he spent with them and all the excitement of watching Corinthians coming to a living faith in Jesus. So he sends them his greetings. He still loves them. His greeting challenges them. Do they still love him enough to heed his teaching? For all the faults of pastoring people, can we say that we wish to pass peace from Christ to each other?

This should be the faith, this should be the mark of faithful pastor, faithful people, that despite all the ups and downs, they're still mutual love. Greetings are important, very important.

They're not just formalities in the church, but are expressions of spiritual desire for one another by shaking hands, by extending greetings to other Christians in other places.

[14:52] We're in effect saying to them, I wish the peace of Christ upon you. And surely we can wish no greater gift that God would bless us with His Christ-bought shalom, both with Him and with each other.

So a question for each one of us this evening, how am I expressing this wish for peace from Christ? How am I greeting other Christians? Peace from Christ. Second, love to Christ.

Love to Christ. The last few verses of this letter aren't all sweetness and light. Reality seldom is, especially when we're dealing with a messy, imperfect church.

In the space of two sentences, Paul applies a swift shock treatment to the Corinthian church. He writes, If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed.

[16:04] Our Lord come. Sometimes a swift shock is what's required to bring us to our senses. That's why we have heart start machines.

Defibrillators. To shock the heart. To bring it back into rhythm. And in the same way, Paul says these things to get to the hearts of the Christians in Corinth and to bring them back into the rhythm of the love of Christ.

In the first instance, he writes, If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Let him be anathema. Greek word, anathema. The chief problem of the Christians in Corinth was simply, they didn't love Jesus like they should have been.

They didn't have that loyalty and gratitude to him which he deserved. Paul's been at pains all the way through this letter to point out all that Jesus has done for them. He became incarnate.

He exchanged the glory of divine blessedness for the weakness and foolishness of the human frame. He endured mockery and ridicule. Having been arrested, he was tortured and crucified.

[17 : 13] He himself gave for the sins of the people. He loved us and gave himself for us. Here is the immeasurable love of Christ. He was crucified for us.

He became accursed. He became anathema on account of our sins. And it's Paul's swift shock that if anyone does not return that love, they should be accursed as Jesus was.

But Paul doesn't say this heartlessly. To quote one of my commentators, go-to commentators, Paul is expressing a strong sentiment with pastoral intent.

Namely, that those Corinthians who do not love the Lord begin to do so and to demonstrate that love ethically. They begin to do so and demonstrate that love ethically.

In other words, love to Christ is expressed in love to Christ's people. By saying what he does, Paul is shocking the Corinthian Christians back into loving Christ by loving his people.

[18 : 24] You know, we can talk a good talk about the depths of theology. Oh, the Corinthians were very good at that. We can manifest all kinds of spiritual gifts.

Again, the Corinthians were very good at that. But, do we really love Christ if we can turn a blind eye to the needs of the people of God? If we can harden our hearts against the pain of other Christians in our fellowship.

Perhaps we need the kind of spiritual heart start Paul is offering here. If anyone has no love for the Lord, demonstrated in practical ways, let him be anathema.

Let him be anathema. Let him be accursed. But then, in the second instance, he writes, Our Lord, come. Our Lord, come.

This is the Aramaic phrase that you will know, Maranatha, Our Lord, come. It's, you never know, Jesus himself might have said these words, Maranatha.

[19 : 31] A very early Jewish Christian phrase probably used first by the church in Jerusalem. It's an expression of desire that Christ should return and come back for his people.

I'm sure that Anna and Benjamin will tell you that long-distance relationships are really hard and they say that absence makes the heart grow fonder. The fondness of heart toward Jesus made this prayer all the more meaningful.

Directed as it was toward Jesus, the Lord, the early Christians prayed, Lord, come. it's as if they're praying, Lord, we want to see you.

We want to be with you and for you to be with us. We long for an end to the struggles of this life. We love you and we want to be with you.

It's this expression of love to Christ. Perhaps the return of Christ isn't something we think about very much. Maybe we're having such a good time here and now with all our wealth that we've forgotten that our love for Him is expressed in an earnest desire for His coming.

[20 : 48] When it all comes down to it, this is where it lands. Do we love Jesus? Do we love Jesus? It's not a question of fluffy and emotional feelings.

It's a question of where our loyalties lie. Do we put Him first above all things? Is life without Jesus unthinkable? And unimaginable?

You know, there may be many imperfections that are about our church here. But if it can be said that we love the Lord, then at least in part, we're reflecting the kind of people God wants us to be.

So again, let me challenge each of us, myself more than any, to ask ourselves the question of whether we love Christ enough to pray to Him this evening.

Maranatha, our Lord come, our Lord come. Love to Christ. And then finally, grace from Christ, grace from Christ.

[21 : 54] Paul concludes the letter in verse 23 with the words, the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. You know, this letter is filled with doctrinal substance

and practical commands.

There's hard teaching. And there's many things which are not just hard to understand, but they're really hard for us to swallow. There's also much teaching in this letter which is deeply countercultural, makes us feel very uncomfortable.

We might be tempted to throw our hands up in the air and say, well, I can't do it. I just can't do these things. Even in these few verses, Paul is calling upon us to greet one another and to wish the peace of Christ upon one another.

But what if we've been dreadfully hurt? We talked about this this morning. We'll talk about it again tonight. What if we've been dreadfully hurt by another Christian in this fellowship and we are finding it very, very difficult to be in the same church as them?

Let alone greet them with a holy kiss. How can we overcome such hurt and such grievance? And Paul answers us and says, the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

[23 : 08] The grace of Christ is the answer to our inabilities and our imperfections. It's the answer, first of all, because many of our difficulties in obeying God's Word and loving other Christians stem from our own pride.

Our own pride. Earlier in this series, Kirk rightly pointed to pride as being the chief sin of the Corinthians. The grace of Christ destroys pride.

The grace of Christ reminds us that we owe everything we are and everything we have as Christians to Jesus. Jesus. We didn't save ourselves. He saved us. He died on the cross and rose from the grave to win our salvation.

We came to Jesus as sinners in need of forgiveness. We came on our knees to Him in humility. We came recognizing that Jesus has done it all and all we did was believed.

That's all we did. How can we take any pride in who we are when who we are are the sinners for whom Christ died? How can I feel superior to someone else when both they and me have been saved from our sins by the same Christ in the same way?

[24 : 28] The key to forgiving others is to remember how much it cost Christ to forgive us. It cost Him His life. If we place the grace of Christ on the cross first and foremost in our hearts we'll be quick to forgive and be reconciled with those who've hurt us.

But secondly many of the grace is the answer because many of the difficulties in our obeying God's Word and loving other Christians stem from our own weakness not just our pride but our weakness. We might intellectually know that on the basis of all Christ has done for us on the cross we have an obligation to forgive others when they sin against us. We might know that intellectually and yet we are scared to expose our vulnerability to tell that person you have really hurt me.

We don't feel able to do what we know we must but the grace of Christ isn't an idea it is spiritual strength and vitality.

It's the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us. The grace of Christ which as Paul will say in 2 Corinthians 12 we'll get to that next Easter or so is made perfect in our weakness and is sufficient for us.

[25 : 51] The grace of Christ flows down into our lives as we look to Him for strength and ability. It is only in and through the grace of Christ we can endure the unendurable and forgive the unforgivable.

The grace of Christ is enough and more than enough again. Whoever we are as Christians we desperately need His grace every day. in the earliest and most reliable manuscripts the last word in the letter to 1 Corinthians isn't Amen but the word Jesus.

Jesus the last word. the church in Corinth may be a desperately imperfect church a right Buddha but it's got a perfect Savior Jesus.

1 Corinthians ends by saying what it said to be a faithful and healthy gospel church we need to fix our eyes upon Jesus.

He needs to be the beginning and the middle and the end of our lives. we exist because of Him and we exist in Him and we exist through Him and we exist for Him.

[27 : 12] He is the object of our praise He is the message of our preaching He is the culture of our practice. Paul began the letter with Jesus. The body of his letter is an encouragement to depend upon and to live like Jesus.

And the end of his letter is Jesus. Like a Christian essayist writing for the glory of God our church must be about Jesus.

Like a Christian essay our individual lives as Christians must be about Jesus beginning continuing unending not with our messy imperfections but the glorious perfections of Jesus.

get to the point say what you've said 1 Corinthians is all about Jesus.

Is our church all about Jesus and our lives all about Him? let us pray. Lord we thank you for this remarkable letter of 1 Corinthians as we've worked through this letter it's challenged us it's convicted us it's comforted us our intellectual knowledge of the faith has grown but our spiritual desire for Christ has grown as well.

[28 : 45] we thank you for every chapter some of these chapters not just difficult to understand but because they're so counter cultural to us even more difficult to swallow but we thank you it's your word and your word comes before our culture and your word must shape our culture not our culture shape your word and so we pray Lord that you would help us this evening that you would give us grace from Christ that we may make Jesus the beginning and the middle and the end of our church and the beginning and the middle and the end of our individual Christian lives.

We ask these things in Jesus' name Amen.