

Unity, Oneness, Wholeness

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Date: 07 June 2026

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[0 : 00] 2 Corinthians 13, verses 11 through 14. We're going to read these verses together.

! Finally, brothers, although that just as easily means brothers and sisters, 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.

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.

Beginnings and endings are often the hardest parts of a letter to write. In any essay or lecture, one begins by saying what one's going to say, then saying it, and then finishes it by saying what one has said.

[1 : 28] That's an essay, a lecture. But a letter and a sermon are different. Letters and sermons don't merely inform, but they persuade, they direct, on the basis of what has been said, a course of action.

Some of you may remember, in old Scottish Presbyterianism, the words of a minister delivered immediately before the distribution of the communion, the bread and the wine, was called the action sermon.

Every letter in the sermon. Every letter in the New Testament, and every sermon, must be an action sermon, designed on the basis of what is said to make us do something, to spur us to action, and to inform those actions we need to take.

Paul's letters are action sermons, but they conclude with many action sermons. How we are on the basis of all the apostles taught us about the gospel of Jesus Christ in that letter, to live for and like Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 13, 11 through 14 is Paul's action sermon from this book. It contains three elements, all of which are summaries of his teaching, but also directions of how we are to apply that teaching in our own lives and in the life of our church here in Crow Road.

[2 : 58] First, there's a call to unity in verse 11. Then there's a call to oneness in verse 12 and 13. And then there's a call to wholeness in verse 14.

There's no point, really, in reading 2 Corinthians if we're not willing to at least listen, heed, and obey these three calls to gospel action.

If by the power of the Holy Spirit we resolve to pursue unity, oneness, and wholeness, we shall most certainly grow and thrive as individual Christians and as a church.

First, a call to unity in verse 11. A call to unity. Finally, brothers and sisters, 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.

The apostle Paul, in line with many preachers, is very good at saying finally, and then going on for ages afterwards. But this time he really does mean it.

[4 : 07] In this context, however, as in many others, finally, in his jargon, doesn't necessarily mean lastly. We take it more in the sense of ultimately, or to sum up, or even more importantly, brothers, rejoice.

It's almost like he's saying to us, if you remember anything from this letter, I want you to remember this. Joy, restoration, comfort, agreement, and peace are to be our main aim as a church.

Now, we live in a day when every church must have a vision. And this, according to Paul, is to be the vision statement of the church in Corinth. Imagine this emblazoned on our wall.

We want to be a joyful community of believers who are restored to God and to each other. We want to be a comforting community who agree with one another and live at peace.

Far better vision statement than many I've heard over the years. He begins with the command to rejoice. Rejoice. Joy is often the last thing we think of when reflecting on the church.

[5 : 19] Joyless, perhaps more often. But for Paul, as my favorite commentator writes, joy should be a foremost mark of every Christian community.

Joy should be a foremost mark of every Christian community. In what is sometimes a joyless world, people come into a church and they find something totally radically different.

Joy. Now, we know that joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit's work among us. And therefore, joy is a mark of the Holy Spirit being with us.

Of course, in this context, joy doesn't mean happiness as such. Let me quote from that favorite commentator, Philip Edgecombe Hughes, again. Joy is the demonstration of a serene and heavenward-looking attitude arising from being joyful in the Lord.

Let me read that again. Joy is the demonstration of a serene and heavenward-looking attitude arising from being joyful in the Lord. Joy is the joy of the Lord.

[6 : 23] The joy of the Christian is not the joy we have in our situations, but in our Savior. Not in our lot in life, but in the Lord of life. Here's an action sermon.

Be joyful in the Lord. The tense Paul uses is imperative. It's a command in its plural form. Joy is not to be just the mark of the church as a whole, but of every member.

I'm not a very gregarious, happy person by nature. But it doesn't mean to say that I can't be joyful. Because joy isn't laughter and gaiety.

Joy is serenity and a heaven-looking attitude. Then Paul says, aim for restoration. Aim for restoration.

And I know that Uncle Campbell, Campbell Brown here, he loves watching the BBC program, The Repair Shop. True? Oh, yeah. So people take broken things to the repair shop, things which mean something to them, and experts restore those things to what they once were.

[7 : 33] And Paul's commanding the Corinthians here, repair your church. Repair your church. And when he's speaking about the church, he's referring to their relationships with God and with each other.

They're to make every effort to restore their broken relationships with God. That relationship that once was so strong, but through a toxic mixture over the years of false teaching and disunity, has been polluted.

And they are to make every effort to repair their broken relationships with each other. They are brothers and sisters, Paul says, at the beginning of verse 11, in Christ. They are one family, but they've been acting like their enemies.

Their celebrations of the Lord's Supper have been farcical. They're acting selfishly. They're discriminating against poorer members of the church. They hold grudges, have formed cliques. Through mutual confession and expressions of love and repentance, they are to repair their relationships with each other. Of course, there's more here than meets the eyes that often is in Scripture, because the command restore here is in the passive voice.

[8 : 44] It's only God who can restore the Corinthians to Him and to each other. So, for this, they must work, and they must pray, recognizing that unity amongst them and usefulness in the service of God is God's gift.

And then Paul calls upon them to comfort one another, to comfort one another. The word here Paul uses is one with which we're familiar. I don't know if Beth's here this evening.

She could probably tell me what it is. Parakaleo means to stand alongside, to be called alongside. That verb used to describe the activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian.

He's the paraclete, the comforter, encourager, helper, advocate, guide. The one who takes the place of Christ and stands alongside us in life.

And Paul's challenging us, saying, to what extent are you helping one another? Encouraging one another? Advocating for one another? Are we helping one another? Comforting each other? Rather than viewing ourselves as strangers or even just as co-worshippers, are we standing alongside each other in all the ups and downs of life?

[10 : 03] The Corinthian Christians often viewed each other as rivals, divided among economic, social, academic, even moral lines.

Where were the encouragers? Encouraging those who are weak at the faith to experience for themselves the sufficiency of Christ's grace. And where were the comforters?

Comforting those going through various types of trouble, as Paul was in chapter 1. And where were the advocates? Those advocating for the needs of others and not their own.

And where were the helpers? Those helping others in their times of difficulty and weakness. Paul is commanding them not to live for the individual, but for the community.

And then he says, Agree with each other. Agree with one another. Or more literally, Be of the same mind, of one mind be. He's not calling upon them to agree with each other about absolutely everything.

[11:08] We're all different. Some of us are extroverts. Some of us are introverts. Some of us like to dress smart. Others like to dress casual. There are many things indifferent upon which there is no need for agreement.

Paul never commands uniformity, that we be clones one of another. He calls for unity. He's calling the Corinthians, Agree with each other about the essential truths of the gospel.

Those things once delivered to the saints. Agree about who Jesus is. Why Jesus came. Agree about the necessity of faith in Christ alone as the way of salvation.

You do not need to agree with me on the color of ties I wear or don't wear tonight. I don't need to agree with you about the kind of music you listen to. But we're to agree with each other on the essentials of the Christian faith.

To be of one mind. We should not be able to put a fag paper. That's an old expression by the way. A fag paper between our attitudes to who Jesus is and what Jesus has done.

[12:16] And the necessity of faith in him. As the way of salvation. And then he says to the Corinthians, Live in peace. Live in peace.

Of course the Corinthians had been at war with each other. Factions in the church. Christians taking each other to court. Public worship. A disordered mess. They needed to stop viewing each other as enemies.

My favorite commentator. He writes, The Christians warfare is with the enemy of souls. And the powers of darkness.

Not with fellow believers. Our society may be at war with itself. But we as a church must not be at war with ourselves. So here we have the pillars of Paul's Christian unity.

The ultimate, finally, and most important things to remember from this letter. By the grace of the Holy Spirit and through the message of the cross, we want to pursue these things.

[13:19] And in so doing, obey God's call to unity among us. Now you will know there are certain promises of God which are unconditional, that don't depend upon us.

But there are others which are conditional, which do depend upon us. And the promise of verse 11 is conditional. If we build our church on Paul's pillars of unity, these five pillars, the God of love and peace will be with you.

There's a sense, of course, in which God's always with us. But if we want the experience of His love and peace with us, we need to strive after these pillars of unity.

We want to be known as a church which is known for the felt presence of the God of love and peace among us. That's why we're to make every effort to aim for restoration, to live in joy, and so on.

Again, I'm referring to Philip Edgecombe Hughes a lot tonight, but he wrote these words. He said, It's not by sitting with folded hands that we enter into the blessings of God, but by actively and purposefully promoting those attitudes which are in accordance with God's will for His people.

[14:39] So, verse 11 here is a call to us to up our game, to do all we can with God's help to live in joy, to aim for restoration, to comfort one another, to agree with one another, to live in peace.

It's not someone else's job to do that for us in this church. It's our job, each one of us as individuals. I wonder whether we're willing to commit ourselves to this radical New Testament vision statement. Well, secondly, in verses 12 and 13, there's a call to oneness, oneness. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you.

Personal testimony here. Not something I would normally do from the pulpit, but I think it illustrates this. A few years ago, someone grievously hurt me. They used me for their own ends.

They didn't really care how much it cost me personally. For some time, I struggled to forgive this man. Wendy Stogner used to say to me, Forgiveness is a well from which I need to drink every day.

[15:54] What a great phrase. Forgiveness is a well from which I need to drink every day. Every day was a struggle to forgive this man. Even though I was trying my hardest to forgive him, it wasn't

a huge deal, because actually, we lived in different cities, and I did everything I could not really to see him.

However, last year I went to a conference, and to my horror, he was there. I was in a panic. What should I do? It is wrong not to forgive.

And furthermore, it's wrong not to express that forgiveness in some way. So after praying with a fellow conference attendee, I did one of the most difficult things I'd ever done. I approached this man, extended my hand, and shook his.

Now, I don't think our relationship will ever fully be restored, because he refuses to admit his guilt, but that extended hand was the best way I could think of at the time to express my forgiveness and desire for that relationship between us to be repaired.

The expression of oneness in our society is a handshake. The expression of restoration and oneness in first century Greek and Roman society was a kiss.

[17:13] Now, the thought of me kissing another man is distasteful. You'd be glad I said that. But for first century men, it was the thing to do to express a greeting.

But more than that, it was the thing to do if you wanted to express your agreement with and affection for another person. So the holy kiss, therefore, is the practical expression of all the principles Paul has laid down in verse 11.

It's the solid evidence that our relationships with other Christians, our agreement with other Christians, and our peace with other Christians has been restored. It's one thing to have a hand. It's another to extend it out to someone who's hurt you. The church in Corinth had been filled with divisions between members, relationships which had been severely damaged.

The holy kiss is the practical demonstration of repair. Paul wants us not just to pretend. He wants the reality.

[18:23] Not play-acting unity, but sincere oneness. And that's why he calls it not just a kiss, but a holy kiss. It's to be sincere. And who knows that the practical expression of that forgiveness may help us to restore that relationship further.

It certainly did in my case. I don't feel any more resentment against the man who hurt me, more pity, really. You know, among us there may be hurt. Not only do we need to forgive the person who's hurt us, in principle, but Paul's telling us to express that forgiveness in a physical, demonstrable way, whatever that may be.

In our case, chances are it won't be a kiss. But it may be a handshake. It may be an embrace. It may be an offer to go for coffee somewhere.

That's the mark of oneness in the gospel. But not only is oneness in Christ to be expressed within a family, the church, but it's to be expressed between churches.

Paul writes, Paul, who had a bigger overview of how all the churches he had planted and established were operating and living, knew that they too wanted to express their oneness with this messed up imperfect church in Corinth.

[19:46] Those other churches, whoever they were, may well have been in a better spiritual state than the church in Corinth. However, they recognized that Corinth was a church of Christ in need of their support, so they sent their greetings.

The challenge for the church in Corinth is to think beyond the walls of their own community and aim for oneness in the whole body of Christ, wherever that's found. And in some ways, that's easy.

It's easy because it's far easier to express our oneness with Christians from far away than it is with Christians who are need at hand. But in another way, it's hard because we're tempted to concentrate merely on our own issues and our own problems rather than take upon ourselves the issues and problems of others far away.

To be congregational rather than ecumenical. That's a temptation, isn't it? Even in a system designed for connectedness, like our system, Presbyterianism, it is too easy to become congregational in the way we think and the way we act.

Paul commands us to pursue oneness with all Christians everywhere. With all Christians within our denomination. With all Christians outside our denomination. With Christians in Scotland.

[21:11] With Christians in South Africa. With Christians everywhere, whoever they may be. They may be very different from us. They may worship in very different ways from us. But we're one.

And just as they send us greetings, so we send them greetings. We want to express our oneness with these believers, whoever they are, in practical ways. So here then, we have our action plan

when it comes to oneness.

to practically express our oneness with Christians in this fellowship. And that can be hard because there are some who have hurt us very grievously.

But also to practically express our oneness with Christians from outside our fellowship. And again, we need to ask ourselves, am I willing to get on board with Paul's radical New Testament vision statement here?

Well then lastly in verse 14, a call to wholeness. A call to wholeness. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

[22 : 24] It's often been said that the epistle of Philippians is the letter of joy, the letter of Galatians is the letter of grace. The deeper truth is that all the letters Paul wrote are peppered with all these virtues.

And never is this more true than here in this final benediction, the greatest blessing in the New Testament. It is the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament Aaronic blessing.

You know the one. May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. Both are threefold blessings. Both communicate the wholeness of God's blessing upon all of His people. Both are expressly Trinitarian. The Lord who is the Father.

The Lord who is the Son. The Lord who is the Spirit. The whole God in His triune glory places His hand upon the church and blesses us with His grace, His love, and His fellowship.

[23 : 37] And He bestows upon us the grace of Christ, the love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The whole God three in one promises to be with us always, for He and He alone is sufficient for us to pursue obedience to these, our action servants.

Without Him, there shall be only failure, but with Him there is wholeness, even as His powerful arms embrace us, uphold us, and strengthen us. You see, all the way through this sermon, we've been asking ourselves the question or saying to ourselves, I cannot possibly live at peace with that person who's hurt me.

How can you expect me, Paul, after all that person's done to me to let go of my bitterness, and this may be the hardest thing to do, especially in the context of the family of the church, where we expect to be accepted and to be safe.

The hurts we receive from other Christians are harder to deal with than the hurts we receive from those who are not Christians. How then, we ask ourselves, can we aim for restoration?

How can we live at peace with those who have hurt us so grievously? We cannot do it in our own power. We can only do it as the whole God gives us Himself in all His grace, love, and fellowship.

[25 : 14] For if God can forgive us at the cost of giving His Son for us on the cross, and if the Holy Spirit is in vital fellowship with us as He is, then we too can forgive the unforgivable and live at peace with those who have hurt us so much.

This final verse of 2 Corinthians is the hand of God raised in love above His universal church in blessing and benediction.

He offers us His wholeness to make us whole. He has brought us, we who once were far away from Him, near to Him in love.

In love, He has reconciled us to Himself through the grace of His Son and lives at peace with us through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. But then again, we ask the question, how can you expect me to encourage and help other Christians when I myself feel so low and need help?

And again, the whole God comes to us and renews our experience of the joy-giving grace of Jesus Christ, the love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

[26 : 33] What then shall we do about all this? And how ultimately shall we apply this to ourselves? We must remember we can do none of this alone.

None of it. None of the injunctions, none of the commands Paul has presented us with in 2 Corinthians. None of it's possible without the experience of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of His Holy Spirit.

So we must do everything, therefore, to pursue that experience for ourselves, to renew our prayer for a deeper relationship with God, to re-devote ourselves to the reading of His Word where that relationship is described and expounded to us, to renew our devotion to the sacraments of this church where God makes visible His invisible graces.

this is our action sermon, to renew our resolve to know Christ for ourselves individually and as a church.

we saw at the beginning of this sermon or we heard the vision statement of the church in Corinth. We want to be a joyful community of believers who are restored to God and to each other.

[27 : 57] We want to be a comforting community who agree with one another and live in peace. I wonder whether we're willing to dare to pursue Paul's radical New Testament vision statement.

It's a call to unity, to oneness, to wholeness. And by the power of God, you know, it's within our reach. It's the call of a lifetime service, but it's a call to which we wish to devote ourselves.

We may be a very imperfect church and we are, but we have a perfect Savior. And so we close with perhaps the greatest words Paul ever wrote.

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