

PAUL'S FINAL THOUGHTS

2 CORINTHIANS 13:1-14

This will be the third time I am coming to you. "By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established." I have told you before, and foretell as if I were present the second time, and now being absent I write to those who have sinned before, and to all the rest, that if I come again I will not spare - since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you. For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you.

Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? - unless indeed you are disqualified. But I trust that you will know that we are not disqualified.

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. For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth. For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. And this also we pray, that you may be made complete.

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.

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. 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 communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

According to the CNN Money website, every year 2.8 million deaths in America are reported to the Social Security Administration - *but there are some mistakes...*

Some years as many as 1 in 200 - or 14,000 people - are counted as dead, when in reality they're very alive.

One such lady was Laura Brooks. The 52 year old suddenly stopped receiving her disability checks. The bank stopped processing her loan payments. When she inquired as to the problem she discovered the government and her bank considered her deceased. To reopen her accounts, she had to prove she was alive.

Fortunately for Laura, proving she was alive wasn't that difficult... *But would it be for you?* What if you had to prove that you were *spiritually alive* - connected to Christ in a saving way - could you muster convincing proof?

This is the test Paul proposes to the Corinthians in the closing chapter of his second letter. In verse 5 Paul challenges them, *"Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?"* He wants to know if his critics in the church were even Christians.

They certainly weren't acting, or thinking, or prioritizing *like Christ*. The false teachers in Corinth had failed to understand

the central concept of Christianity - *that God in His grace reveals His strength through our weakness.*

You would think a true Christian who had embraced the cross of Jesus would understand this paradox.

At the cross God used the world's greatest display of weakness - a victim of Roman crucifixion - to do the most powerful work ever accomplished. Jesus earned a pardon for sinners, and rose to pass it out by strength, but through weakness - His crucifixion and resurrection.

Paul's critics had judged him on all the wrong criteria.

Paul boasted in his scars - the weaknesses in his life where God had shown Himself strong. Whereas, the false teachers had it backwards. They gloried in their own skill, and the materialistic trappings of their ministry.

They had leveled criticism after criticism against the Apostle Paul calling into question not only *the legitimacy of his ministry*, but even *the sincerity of his faith*.

Finally, in Chapter 13 Paul says they should stop questioning him and question themselves. He writes, *“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith?”*

But before he gets there, Paul explains in verse 1, *“This will be the third time I am coming to you. ‘By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established.’”* This past week pitchers and catchers reported to spring training - *and this is a really big deal.*

Forget about the groundhog seeing his shadow, this is the real harbinger of spring. Pitchers work on the ole throwing motion... Catchers dust off their equipment...

And yesterday, yours truly - an old Little League batting practice pitcher - was called on to report for duty!

I got the nod from my oldest son. He pulled me out of baseball coaching retirement to throw batting practice to his T-ball team. And wow, was it a lot of fun! I was rusty for three pitches; then I picked up right where I left off.

I bring up baseball because one of its concepts helps us grasp what Paul does in verse 1. You've heard the song, "[Take Me Out To The Ball Game](#)." There's a line, "[And it's one, two, three strikes you're out, at the old ball game](#)." This phrase, "[Three strikes, you're out](#)" is now an official expression in the English language.

And this is how Paul opens Chapter 13. Twice, he tells the church at Corinth - [three strikes and you're out!](#)

Once he does it directly... Once he quotes a verse...

First, Paul refers to his upcoming visit - it'll be his **third** trip to Corinth... He was there the first time to plant the church... He returned a second time between the writing of his first and second letters. He called it his "[sorrowful visit](#)" - it didn't go so well. His critics attacked and bucked his authority. Much of the frustration and angst Paul emotes in chapters 10-13 came from his "[sorrowful visit](#)."

And now he's headed back in a matter *of weeks - if not days*. This third time, Paul is expecting a different attitude from the Corinthians. But if this visit results in another relational meltdown this could be *the final strike*.

Another bout of ugliness could ruin Paul's influence in Corinth. It could solidify the alienation between *the truth of the Gospel*

and *the hearts of the Corinthians*. The false teachers would've won. After the first two strikes you get another chance, but the third strike proves final.

Paul also quotes Deuteronomy 19:15, **“By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established.”** In the Jewish court, one eye witness was never enough for a conviction. The testimony had to be corroborated. Two eye-witnesses though constituted a stronger argument. *And three witnesses... case closed.*

Paul is giving the Corinthians an ultimatum in advance of his visit. Twice he's been a witness to their rebellion.

Now he's coming a third time, and hopes their reaction doesn't seal a negative verdict. Paul doesn't want to judge their hard hearts. He's closing with a warning...

In essence, Paul is coming to Corinth as an umpire, and they need to know *it's three strikes and you're out.*

He writes in verse 2, **“I have told you before, and foretell as if I were present the second time, and now being absent I write to those who have sinned before, and to all the rest, that if I come again I will not spare...”** The word translated **“spare”** means **“to spare in battle.”** Paul is declaring war on the false teachers.

When he arrives in Corinth, he won't be afraid to do whatever it takes to put his opponents in their place.

Paul is uttering a full-throated threat. He intends to shut-up the people in Corinth who have been slandering his character, and lying about his ministry.

He writes, “Since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak toward you, but mighty in you.”

It’s true, that Jesus had done mighty and miraculous things in the church at Corinth. The church had been born in the midst of a Spirit-led, supernatural revival.

But rather than see that *God’s strength* is preceded by *our weakness*, the Corinthians were fixated on the power. The whole point of this letter was to correct their perception... Christ is mighty. But don’t forget *His resurrection* followed *His crucifixion*... And in Paul’s life, a *powerful ministry* rose from *personal weakness*.

Set off a Roman candle and watch the color and sizzle, but when it’s over, realize it came from an empty, paper shell. This is true of all Christian ministry. The fireworks comes from God in us, not us, the shell.

Again, Paul holds up Jesus as the example. “For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you.”

Paul had been criticized for being *weak in his appearance - unpolished in his speech - unpretentious in his style*. He wasn’t as flamboyant as his critics.

The carnal Corinthians mistook *gawdy* for *godly*.

But Paul straightens them out by pointing to Jesus.

According to worldly criteria our Lord appeared weak. He impressed us with His simplicity. He hung out with the humble, not the high and mighty. He identified with the poor, and shunned the trappings of the privileged. The Roman

cross was the antithesis of what the world sees as successful, and pleasing, and pretty.

Yet through weakness Jesus unleashed the power of God. And this is the paradox experienced by not just Paul, but everyone who's called to serve the Lord.

Paul was certainly tired of defending himself among the Corinthians. Their false teachers had questioned his integrity at every turn. Finally, in verse 5 he suggests they should be questioning themselves...

“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? Unless indeed you are disqualified.” Here is a profound truth, **just because you call yourself a Christian doesn't mean you are one...**

Attend church, wear a Christian T-shirt, use Christian verbiage, memorize a few Bible verses, *even listen to Chris Tomlin* - none of it makes you a Christian!

Paul concedes that some of the Corinthians were pulling the wool over their eyes - *fooling themselves*.

A mother overheard her little girl pray, **“Now I lay me down to rest. I pray I pass tomorrow's test. If I should die before I wake, that's one less test I'll have to take.”**

But the truth is all of life is a test, and we don't receive the final grade until we die. At that point, it's pass or fail. Either you embraced Jesus as Lord, or you didn't - *you resisted Him, or just never get around to taking Him seriously...* **Both receive failing grades!**

One of my earliest memories was of my mom at church. She sang in the choir - even played the organ. From all appearances she was a devout Christian.

I'll never forget the night of the big revival. The guest evangelist was in the middle of the altar call. I don't remember the song being played. It was probably "Just As I Am" - but suddenly the music stopped. I looked over at the organ to find Mom, but she wasn't there.

She had stopped playing, and had responded to the invitation. She was standing in the altar in her choir robe. It took guts for Mom to do that! She was heavily involved in the church, but that night she realized that all the good works in the world won't save you. Mom had never given her life to Jesus - *that night she did.*

As a kid I was baptized three times thinking I was a Christian - yet I had never surrendered my will to Jesus. It can happen. *We profess, but don't possess.*

Perhaps you've been coming to Calvary for years. Even served in various ways, but you skipped a step.

Rather than surrender your life to Jesus, you're still in control. You'll come - even participate - as long as it benefits you. But you haven't given your life to Jesus.

Sadly, I believe hell is going to be filled with church members who never examined themselves to see if they were actually *in the faith*, or just *packing a pew*.

Once a young man enrolled in a theological seminary, but when the officials sent off for his under-graduate transcripts there was an apparent mix-up.

Officials at his former college knew the fellow - he'd been popular on campus - but there was no record of him being enrolled - *no classes, no credits, no grades.*

When they contacted him to clear up the confusion, *he confessed.* He'd taken the money his parents sent him for four years of college, but had never officially enrolled. He went to class, but audited the courses. He attended college, yet was never truly on the rolls. It turns out he was a pretender - merely a by-stander.

And I'm afraid that's exactly what we're going to find out one day about many people in the church. They attended class, but were never truly enrolled, never a part. They audited the Christian life, *and got no credit!*

It's been calculated by the time a person finishes college they will have taken over 2600 tests and quizzes. *But there's one more exam I hope you take...*

Examine your heart! Test your faith... See if Christ truly dwells in you. This is the most vital test of all.

And by putting together several Scriptures: **Romans 8:9, 1 John 3:14, 1 John 2:29, 1 John 5:4** - I've created an SAT. Call it a **Salvation Acquisition Test.**

Here are four questions you should ask yourself...

First, do you sense the Holy Spirit's presence in your life? Is there an inner witness inside your psyche? Romans 8 assures us that God's Spirit will bear witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

Second, do you love other believers? If you're connected to the Father you'll love His family. Is there this outer witness...

a camaraderie with God's family?

Third, do you practice righteousness? What God *puts in* eventually wiggles its *way out*. A cleansed heart ultimately produces - not a *perfect* - but a *purer life*.

And *fourth*, are you overcoming the world? Have you experienced a newfound motivation and inner strength that helps you resist temptation and stand up for God?

If you're in Christ, the answer to all four questions should be **"yes!"** Again, none of us have arrived. We all have a long way to go, *but we should be making progress. Is there measurable change in your life?*

It's been said, **"It's difficult to live a Christian life without knowing that you are one."** This is why we need to **"*examine ourselves as to whether we are in the faith*"** - and gain some assurance of our salvation.

And then Paul adds, **"But I trust that you will know that we are not disqualified."** Paul is hoping he's already shown them enough personal evidence for them to have confidence in his conversion to Christ.

When he arrives, he hopes he'll get their respect.

Verse 7, **"Now I pray to God that you do no evil, not that we should appear approved..."** Paul is not like the guy who points out flaws in others to make himself look good. This is the tactic of *the self-righteous person*.

When you depend on your own goodness to please God you tend to grow overly-critical of other Christians. By putting everyone else down you elevate yourself.

But this wasn't Paul's tactic. Though the Corinthians attacked him, he harbored no secret wish for the Corinthians to fail. He hopes only the best for the Christians in Corinth. He writes, "but that you should do what is honorable, though we may seem disqualified."

Paul was sure of his salvation - *despite his scars, his setbacks, his scourging, his sickness, his shipwreck* - Paul was confident God had not forsaken him.

Paul knew he was forgiven and loved in Christ.

Though it seemed at times that God had abandoned him, the apostle knew his status was secure. Some of his critics might've viewed him as disqualified, but Paul was certain he'd been accepted by God, and he longed for the Corinthians to have the same assurance.

Paul states, "For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth. For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong." If somehow, Paul taking a backseat could embolden the Corinthians' faith, he'd be happy to appear weak, so they could be strong.

If he had a need the Corinthians could meet... Or there was a reason for them to pray for him... Or if he had a weakness or fear, they could help him overcome; then so be it. Anything to encourage them in the truth.

Notice again though, verse 8, "For we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth." This has been an extremely strategic verse throughout Church history.

Because of this verse (and others like it) when a believer

faces a contradiction between the church or pope or council, and the Bible - it's the Bible we follow.

If your choice is *tradition* or *truth* - there is no choice. As Paul writes, "*We can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth.*" Our conscience is bound to the truth.

This was how Martin Luther answered the Council of Worms, when they had the power to put him to death.

He was being tried for teaching the biblical doctrine of justification by faith - that we're saved by faith alone.

When asked to recant, he responded, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of popes and councils for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, God help me. Amen." Paul too, did nothing against the truth.

Verse 9, "*And this also we pray, that you may be made complete.*" Paul's desire for the Corinthians was for them to be complete in Christ. The word translated "*complete*" means "*thoroughly equipped, fully fitted.*"

We leave for Israel next Sunday. It'll be my ninth tour. But it was tough to pack and prepare for the first.

There were so many unknowns. I'd never been to Israel. I wasn't sure what to expect... *the weather, the currency, the language, the food, the customs, etc.*

But the travel agent came to the rescue. A week ahead of time we were all sent a detailed travel packet. It provided us

all the vital info. It gave us the full scoop.

And this was how Paul prayed for the Corinthians. That they would be prepared for their Christian journey.

When you first become a Christian you're also faced with many unknowns. You're not sure what to expect. Old friends and fears, trials and temptations - new opportunities. *What should I do? How can I be ready?*

We can pray that God will **“complete”** us in Christ.

And like a good travel agent God has sent us our travel documents. He's mailed us a packet of detailed information - we call it, *the Bible...* and if we take it seriously, and follow it carefully, it'll keep us out of a ton of trouble and maximize the enjoyment of our trip. How do you pack and prepare for life's journey... *this book!*

Verse 10, **“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.”** A letter often enables us to say some hard, touchy things to people.

A letter, *or an email*, enables you to let it all hang out.

And it gives the person you write the opportunity to digest your opinion - even stomach your disapproval - before they feel they have to formulate a response.

This is what this letter did for the Corinthians. Paul could be as sharp as he needed to be - and it gave the Holy Spirit an opportunity to work in the hearts of its readers - before they had to answer their accuser.

Paul's closing comments begin in verse 11...

“Finally, brethren, farewell.” Suddenly, the tone of the letter changes. For the last four chapters Paul has been questioning whether some of these Corinthians were **“brethren”** or not. His skepticism reaches a crescendo by daring them to examine their salvation.

But apparently his cynicism has subsided, and he's willing to concede that *yes, most of them are brothers.*

And he says to his brethren, **“Become complete.”** Again, the problem wasn't that they weren't saved, but they'd never grown. They were lacking and anemic.

This could be your problem. Examine the vitality of your faith - but if it's been waning don't immediately jump to the conclusion that you're not a Christian.

You may be a Christian who lacks instruction. For years I had the desire to live the Christian life, but was never taught how. I didn't understand the Scriptures.

That's why Paul reiterates, **“become complete”** - pay attention to the travel documents God sent. Study your Bible, and you'll have a much more enjoyable journey.

Here's an example... When you travel overseas you're tempted to use your cell phone, just as you would in the States. *Beware!* Different rules apply in different countries. You can rack up enormous charges.

And this is what happens when a person first comes to Christ - *they tend to act the way they always have.*

Say it's your cell phone. Now that you're a Christian *the terms of use* are different. *You should have to click on a little*

button. Do you agree to *God's terms of use*.

You don't call the same people you did before. You don't log onto the same websites. You don't use it to text gossip. Again, consult the travel documents, and they'll teach you the Christian-way to use that phone. The Bible "*completes*" or *fills in* our new life in Christ!

Paul continues, "*Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.*" Understand, the fact that we're told to "*be of good comfort, be of one mind, and live in peace*" implies that it's at least partly within our power to do so.

Usually we think of comfort, unity, and peace as up to the person or people we're with at the time. *Will they comfort me? Will they work with me and seek peace?*

But the answers to those questions to a large degree lie with me. Do you create a conducive atmosphere...

I can endear myself to people with my kindness... Or my abrasive personality can rub people the wrong way and prevent them from wanting to ever comfort me?

"Hey, I'll be of one mind, as long as it's my mind - my opinion." That's not an attitude that unifies people.

And don't expect people to live peacefully with you, if you're the belligerent person always picking a fight.

Whether we're "*of good comfort*" and "*of one mind*" and able to "*live in peace*" does to a degree depend on the airs we give off, and how we approach people.

Verse 12, "*Greet one another with a holy kiss.*"

Professor Michael Christian of Boston College has written two books on the subject of kissing. But since the release of his second book, "*The Art of Kissing*," the good professor says his love life has gone downhill.

Christian explains what's happened to him, "*Now when I kiss a woman she usually responds, 'You wrote the book on kissing and that's the best you can do.'*"

Oh, the problem with being an expert!

In his books, Michael Christian says there're 25 different kisses. I'm not sure his list includes the "*holy kiss*," but Paul tells the rest of us *Christians* to indeed greet each other with a "*holy...*" - that is **godly** kiss.

This was an important distinction for the Corinthians coming out of a lifestyle where lust ran rampant and sex was worshipped. Paul says *keep the kissing holy*.

Once I had a fellow tell me what first attracted him to church was all the hugging that went on. He walked around the room hugging all the good-looking women!

That is not a *holy hug*! Paul isn't just saying, "*greet each other with a kiss*," he's saying with equal force - knock-off the fleshly kissing as well. Make it holy!

Actually, in Paul's day a kiss was a cultural greeting, like a handshake today. Perhaps if Paul were writing to us, he'd say, "*Greet each other with a holy handshake*."

The point is we should extend a warm, sincere, touchable greeting. Our world is a cold and cruel place. Some folks are never touched by another human in a caring way. We should

demonstrate our love tangibly.

Dacher Keltner is a psychology professor at UC Berkeley who says our social awareness is profoundly tactile. He's done research on *the celebratory touches* of pro basketball players: "fist pumps, high-fives, chest bumps, leaping shoulder bumps, chest punches, low fives, high tens, full hugs, half hugs, team hugs, etc."

Keltner concluded that human touch *lowers stress*, it *builds morale*, it *produces victories*. The teams that touch more, win more. *And this is true in the church.*

Expressions of acceptance bring us together. Meaningful touch affirms our importance to each other. These acts are a celebration of our common calling. **How Christians greet each other is no trivial matter!**

So be demonstrative in your greetings... *Handshake or high five... chest bump or fist pump... or even a **kiss**...* Just keep it *holy!* The acceptance and mercy we communicate in our "*welcomes*" should be sacred.

Paul finishes his letter, "**All the saints greet you.**"

Paul was writing from Macedonia, and the believers there also extended their greetings to the Corinthians.

He closes with a final benediction. "**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.**"

This verse emphasizes God's Triune nature. **He's one God, yet three persons** - Father, Son, and Spirit.

And this last verse is a blessing. Imagine, all three members of the Godhead joining together to improve your lot in life. The Son promises to shower us with **grace**. The Father surrounds us with **love**. And the Holy Spirit indwells us to reveal in us God's **presence**.

May we live every minute of every day in all three - *in grace* - *in love* - *and in communion with the Holy Spirit!*