

SPIRITUAL HEALTH

2 Corinthians 13

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We come to the close of our series that has taken us through the Corinthian letter. I hope you have been blessed by this series. I know there are many times when my own life has been touched deeply as we have gone through the study and the preparation. Just a few months ago, as we were preparing 2 Corinthians, I would have no way of knowing that my father would slip into the Lord's presence. That was the week the Lord gave us the Scripture "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). How good is the timing of the Lord! I'm going to read 2 Corinthians 13. As I move through the message, I'll spend some moments in introduction by noting again, as I studied this week, how I would have not liked to pastor the Corinthian church. Had I been a pastoral candidate for his church and found out what some of the problems the church had were, I don't think I'd have let my name be considered as pastor. I would have found out that they had four divisions in the church—major splits, still meeting under one roof. I would have discovered that they had immorality in the church, and some of the church members were proud that hadn't even disciplined the person who was guilty of the immorality. I would have found a church that had confused and misplaced emphasis on spiritual gifts. And terrible disorder in their worship services, to the point of driving unbelievers away from their services because of the disorder. I would have found a church that had almost a total lack of discernment in some quarters on spiritual issues and the selection of spiritual leaders. Some of the members of the church I would have found were suing one another in courts of law. There were even some who held to doctrinal heresy. Not just minor heresies you understand, but some in the church were advocating that Jesus himself had not risen from the dead. I'd have

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found some people in the church that were legalists that emphasized holiness to the point of extreme absurdity in their list of do not's. And other people, on the other side of the aisle, that said, "Since you like God to be glorified and to show us how strong His grace is, because we are such sinners..." I would have discovered that some came to *agape* love feasts, which were pot luck dinners, and got drunk and carried themselves to the Lord's table in such a condition. I'd have said, "Somebody else can have that church." I'm glad this church is not like the Corinthian church. I'd probably given up long ago. But isn't it great that God doesn't give up on His people? I think that's what's so fascinating about the Corinthian letter, that God doesn't give up on His people. All the problems that the Corinthian church were having were certainly more extreme than any church that I've ever been associated with or known in my life. Yet God never once gave up on that church. And the apostle Paul never once gave up on the people that were in the church.

Sometimes, there's a connection between the character of a church and the culture of the geographical location that the church is planted in. The Corinthians were known for the kind of divisiveness and misplaced values and emphasis that the Greek theater and drama often had, when a person was depicted on a stage as being a drunkard or living a dissolute life, they were portrayed as a Corinthian. The Greek world even made a verb out of the name "Corinth" in order to describe corruption of morals. A "corrupter of morals," was one who "Corinthianized." To "corinthianize," was to lead someone down a dissolute path.

So the church had struggles because the character of the town so had shaped their own personality that it took the character of Christ some time to fully develop. At conversion, they were instantly justified, born again, and made righteous in God's presence. But it took time for that salvation to have its effect in their lives. Paul later writes to Titus. Titus is on the island of

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Crete. The church there in Crete was having the same kind of cultural struggles as the church in Corinth, because they were wrestling with the culture of Crete. So Paul would say that one of their own poets had said, “Cretans are always liars, evil brutes and lazy gluttons. This testimony is true” (Titus 1:12).

The church character was having problems because of the culture. I thought of that in regard to Southern California culture. The characteristic of Southern California culture is physical proximity and relational distance. What do I mean by that? Everybody is living right up against you. It’s different than the Midwest, where you have a third of an acre and you don’t have fences of cinder block walls. And even though you’re physically further apart from your neighbor, you know him better. I doubt many of us know our neighbor in front, left or right, or behind us.

We’re physically close but we’re relationally distant.

What happens when the body of Christ tries to form in Southern California? It encounters the same problems. We can show up at large meetings and Christians in Southern California are great for turning out at meetings and building ministries and turning out in mass large groups. We’re great at physical proximity, but often we have relational distance. We don’t really know one another. Sometimes, we don’t take the time to know one another, even in the body of Christ. The church, the whole body of Jesus Christ in Orange County, faces this as a constant struggle against the culture, to encourage Christians to really be the body. And not just be like a television set and plug in for the voltage you need at that particular moment in your spiritual life, unplug, then go plug in somewhere else. But connect as a living body of people.

These last verses in the Corinthian letter, I think, speak to us of some characteristics of a healthy church. Knowing that God doesn’t choose sick Christians, this chapter beautifully talks to us about some principles of healthy churches and healthy Christians. I’m going to state three out of

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this passage, although I know that these three do not totally describe the attributes of the healthy Christian in the healthy church. I'd expect when these three qualities are present, the other qualities that are needed to make up a healthy church and a healthy Christian will also be there.

The three qualities are these:

I. Spiritually healthy Christians willingly accept discipline.

Paul writes in verse 1, "This will be my third visit to you. 'Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses'" (2 Corinthians 13:1, NIV). Throughout the whole letter, Paul has been trying to get this church to live with some discipline in their life, discipline in their spiritual discernment, their selection of leaders, the cause that they back, and especially the rebellious faction in the church that was rebelling against, not only the authority of the apostle, but against the authority of the Lord. Paul is now having to say, "I hope this letter solves it. I hope this letter brings discipline to the Corinthian church. But if it doesn't, when I come, we'll need to have a church trial in accordance or Deuteronomy 19 and the Lord's teaching in Matthew 18. I've gone to you privately. Now we're going to have a trial where we have at least two or three witnesses and let the whole church decide on the matter." Paul is saying, "I don't want to do that. I don't want to impose that kind of discipline. But it's going to be necessary if you don't receive the discipline of this letter."

All of us as Christians need to have a willingness to be corrected as well as a willingness to correct others at times. We need to adopt a spirit of not being defensive about correction. When an athlete is corrected for having done something wrong, they don't take offense at the coach for having corrected them. There is an attitude of thankfulness that a weakness has been pointed out and a discipline has been given for compensating and overcoming that weakness. It's the same in the spiritual realm. When a brother or sister, or the Lord himself, lays His hand or their hand

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upon our life to point out an area where we need development rather than being defensive and hurt about that, it is a mark of spiritual health to receive it and to profit from it.

It's interesting that Paul, as a leader in the church, does not approach discipline from the standpoint of throwing his apostolic weight around. He doesn't say, "When I come to you, I'm going to use the apostolic gift of knowledge and I'm going to suddenly, in the Spirit, say such and such is guilty of such and such. And whoever I call out is going to be condemned and kicked out of the church."

No, he said, "We do it by process. We're going to do it with two or three witnesses that will have evidence. There will be proceedings." There's a fairness in the way the discipline would be handled.

Sometimes, discipline is very painful. And it's very painful to have to correct a situation or correct a person. But if we don't do it, the body of Christ is harmed and the individual is harmed as well.

One wonders, looking back from the vantage point of time, did the Corinthians accept the discipline that Paul gave? The indications between the lines of Scripture are that they did receive and accept the discipline. We know, for example, when Paul writes the Roman letter from the city of Corinth, that in the Roman letter he mentions nothing about the Corinthian problem. In fact, he says in that Roman letter that he planned to visit Rome and Spain; it's doubtful that he would have been making those travel plans if the church in Corinth were still in disarray.

We also know from the Roman letter that he completed the collection that he was taking for the Jerusalem saints, and evidently there had been another problem at Corinth that had been solved. Furthermore, the church preserved this 2 Corinthian letter, which is perhaps the best testimony that they received the discipline, because they kept the letter. And we have it today.

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Spiritually healthy Christians willingly accept discipline.

II. The second mark of spiritual healthy Christians in this passage is that spiritually healthy Christians do not demand authoritarian leadership.

I don't know how many times this issue has been raised in the last few chapters of 2 Corinthians. I'm almost glad, in one sense, we're coming to the end of Corinthians, so we can quit talking about leadership and the qualifications for leadership, because that has been a constant theme that Paul has plucked at in these last four chapters. There is a difference between having authority as a leader and having an authoritarian disposition in the exercise of leadership. Look at verses 2–4 and verse 10, “I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent [An authoritarian leader would have spoken once and that would have been about it. The second time he'd cut your water off!]: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him [This has been the charge always against Paul by his critics—he's weak. He's got a weak personality. They misread his tenderness as being weakness], yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you... This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down” (2 Corinthians 13:2–4,10, NIV). The Corinthians had consistently misread Paul, because he did not demonstrate a macho, authoritarian kind of spirit, they had misread him and said he wasn't really qualified to be a strong leader.

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I think some interesting questions can arise to help us determine whether or not leadership is authoritarian. On observing some leadership styles, I've come up with five questions that I think can flesh out that subject.

A. To whom does the leader answer and to whom is he accountable? That's a critical question for leadership. As a person, if I'm not answerable to anyone, then I am not doing myself a favor. Because there's no one who can correct me. Leaders who have no one to answer to are in very vulnerable situations. One of the things they fight over, is being authoritarian, since there is no one to answer to:

B. Are questions to that leader treated as challenges to authority? When there are legitimate questions that are raised, does the leader treat them as honest questions or does the leader treat them as challenges to his own authority?

C. Do followers become drones? I see periodically persons that look like and talk like and maybe think and act like leaders that maybe they follow. I don't like the term that "such and such a person is a disciple of mine." I hear the term in the ministry and I always say inwardly, when I hear that, "That's the problem. They should have been the Lord's disciple and they're your disciple. That's why they're struggling." I'm not out to make anyone my disciple. I have found that the more truly we become like Jesus Christ, the more truly we become ourselves. If you look at the disciples of Jesus, sure, they became like Him, but they were strong individuals and none of them were like anyone else in terms of disposition. They found a common unity, yet they were unique. Authoritarian leaders tend to produce drones.

D. Does the leader use his position to gain special advantages of privilege? Paul did not use his position for such a purpose.

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E. Is there a hierarchy of personnel around the leader? Or does the leader surround himself with persons who are strong personalities in their own right?

A constant rotation of leadership is suggesting that persons who are given strong gifts and strong personalities cannot work well because everybody must fit into the system. That is a mark of scriptural authority. Look at people who surround Paul. I went through the epistles one day and the Book of Acts and discovered about twenty or twenty-one associates of Paul's that worked with him. Every one of them he was confident in placing in positions that were very stressful and very difficult. They were not drones. They were not weak persons. They were strong individuals. His leadership style had produced that kind of strength in them and he was not threatened by them.

Paul sees the true position of leadership in the body of Christ as being one which builds up rather than tears down. He does not need to diminish another person's gifts or skills in order to enhance his own. But the whole idea of the leadership task is to build up Christ's body.

Spiritually mature Christians will not respond well to authoritarian leadership. That is generally the mark of persons who have not matured in their own spiritual life, which will embrace that style of leadership.

III. The third mark of a healthy Christian that's seen in this passage is that spiritually healthy Christians have fruit to match their witness.

“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves” (2 Corinthians 13:5, NIV). Notice in verse 3 that they had been demanding proof. They'd been testing Paul. Now Paul turns it around and says, “Test yourself. You've been wanting to test me, test yourself.” “Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. Now we pray to God that you will not do

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anything wrong. Not that people will see that we have stood the test but that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. We are glad whenever we are weak but you are strong; and our prayer is for your perfection” (1 Corinthians 13:5–9, NIV).

Verse 11, “Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, 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 send their greetings. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:11–14, NIV).

The Corinthians had been demanding proof of Paul and he turns it back on them by saying, “Test yourself.” Normally, when we read this Scripture—“Examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith”—how many of you feel guilty when you hear that? Just the slightest examination! There’s some flaw in me and I know it and I’ve failed the test again. But that isn’t what Paul means by this. These Corinthians have been challenging him as an apostle and he’s saying, “You’ve been examining me. Now let me put it on the other foot—examine yourself. And if when you examine yourself, you find yourself in the faith then that establishes my credentials as an apostle. For you are my letter, [as he says in chapter 3] to be read of all men. So if you examine yourself and you find yourself in the faith, that’s a mark that I’m a genuine apostle. If you’re not in the faith, then it proves that I failed the test. And I hope,” he says, “that I haven’t failed the test.”

It’s kind of a beautiful way of trying his leadership with their spirituality. Saying, “When you examine yourself, if God has helped me to do a good work in you and you see that you are Christ’s people, then you will have stood the test and so will I.”

It’s a good phrase, though, for us in our life—to examine ourselves. “The unexamined life,” someone has said, “is a life not worth living.” The real practical test of life is, “Is Christ in me?”

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Is Christ in me today?” Not, “Did I walk down an aisle once and give my life once upon a time to Christ?” Although that obviously is critically important. Not, “Did I join a church?” Not, “Did I do some good?” Not, “Did I contribute to the offering this morning or some other time?” But, “Is Christ genuinely living in me? And am I receiving all of Christ for today that I am capable of receiving?”

In verse 11, Paul gives us some practical admonitions by which we can measure, whether or not our fruit corresponds to our confession. What is our aim? Paul says, “Aim for perfection.” A mark of having fruit to match our witness is that we are not content simply with being where we are now. The Christian has this balance between rest and thanking God that we are in our Christian development as far as we are. Yet development for more. A hunger for development of more. The word “perfection” carries with it the idea of restoring, of mending, of bringing to a place of wholeness or completeness.

How my understanding of that word “perfection” has changed from when I was in high school. I got into an argument with a Baptist high school friend of mine as to the attainability of Christian perfection. Given his Baptist background, he held to a positional sanctification, whereas, I held to the holiness emphasis of actual sanctification, that we could actually become perfect. My argument was, “If indeed Christ tells us to be perfect—He would never give us a command that we couldn’t do. So that means that at some point in my life I can be perfect and maintain that position of perfection.” I think I wrote a seven or eight-page, single-spaced theological paper as a junior in high school on that subject. I didn’t submit it for a class. I submitted it to win my argument with my friend. Actual sanctification. I quoted every Scripture I could find in the New Testament, and most in the Old Testament, on perfection. I wanted to be perfect.

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How my view of that has mellowed. I've come to understand perfection, not as flawlessness in that sense, but as a life that is moving toward maturity, wholeness, completeness.

That's what Paul is telling us, "Make that your aim in life. That'll be a mark of your progress in your spiritual life and your fruit. Move toward wholeness. Don't let your fixation in life be on something that was in the past." Many people live fixated on some moment in the past.

"Forgetting the things that are behind, press on" (Philippians 3:13). Moving into the future with the Lord, becoming oriented for the potential that God has for me. Not being content just being as good as someone else. But to be God's best that I can be in my life.

A readiness to listen is another quality of fruit that matches witness. "Not just aiming for perfection or wholeness, but listening to my appeal," he says. This is opposite to the spirit that won't take counsel and says, "My mind's made up. Don't confuse me with the facts." We describe a person like that as bullheaded. Bulls are very powerful animals. But the reason why they don't often get the job done when they chase somebody, is they don't stop and look and listen. They just charge blindly. If they'd just take time to evaluate the position that they're in, then they'd take major steps. Those horns could do a lot more damage than they do. But they're bullheaded. "Be open," Paul says. "Don't always be in a rush and frenzy. Be ready to listen."

"Be of one mind with your fellow believers," is another admonition of fruit that matches witness. Not that we agree on every issue with our fellow Christians, but that we have the mind of Christ, who has taught us the new commandment—"Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34).

Then, "live in peace" is another mark of Christian fruit (verse 11). As much as is within you, live peaceably with all men, Paul will say in another place. Here it's simply, "Live in *shalom*."

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I choose, therefore, as a Christian, to lay aside strife and division. I refuse to make minor issues major ones. My choice of words and tone of voice is meant to reflect gentleness. I choose to respond to a hurt that others would lay upon me by not letting their anger enter me. I will be a forgiving person.

Goals of a Christian life. Attitudes, perspectives.

These letters close with greetings and a benediction. Paul says, “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (verse 12, NIV). What the church has missed by not keeping that admonition, which is found five times in the New Testament! We substitute in our culture, “Greet one another,” with a hearty handshake or a holy hug. But take time to greet one another. How important that is as we meet.

How difficult it is at times for us to obey this very simple admonition—“Greet one another warmly.” Don’t let anybody come in and slip out unnoticed, feeling unwanted, unloved. The pastor’s sermon can be the most powerfully anointed and scintillating message, one of the few that he may preach in ten years, and that person will go out not moved or touched, because they say, “No matter what was said, I was not received as a person.” So Paul says to Christians, “Be on the alert. Practice hospitality toward one another by greeting. And move even beyond that to genuine hospitality. When you come into the Lord’s presence, come into one another’s presence.”

“Greet one another and recognize the bonds with other believers. The other saints send you greetings” (see verses 12-13). We’re not just a lone ranger church off here doing our own thing. We are part of the entire body of Christ in this area and around the world. We are linked with the body of Christ.

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Then the Trinitarian benediction. Because Jesus Christ has given us grace, we know the love of God. And because that's happened, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit has brought us into communion with God and with one another.

Watching the Olympics, the ceremony at the beginning of the games—some extravaganza! I felt goose bumps, I don't know how many times! I had tears watering up my eyes a few times in various parts of that ceremony. I thought, "They have really knocked themselves out to tell the world "welcome" and tell the athletes of the world "welcome."

All of a sudden, I thought, "If Hollywood and America can go to this much trouble to prepare a welcome for the athletes of the world, we have no idea of what God has in mind for all the people who are showing up for His kingdom and the opening celebration of the marriage supper of the Lamb." Talk about a knock-out performance that brings goose bumps. And those Corinthian Christians are there. Out of that city, which is past into the city which is eternal. Our time is temporary, their time was temporary. But we are headed for an eternal city and an eternal destination. And God help us while we're on the journey to be the best and most wholesome and caring and loving and disciplined Christians we can be for the glory of God, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we thank You for all of these weeks and months we've had together in this letter.

We're so grateful that, as we open the pages of the New Testament, the Holy Spirit who spoke them into existence through the apostle's pen still speaks them into existence through our heart.

And the life of Jesus Christ, which was being formed in the Corinthians, is again being formed in us. O Lord, form Your life completely and wholly in us. Make us like You. For persons here today that are not in spiritual health, we pray that You will bring them to spiritual health. Bring

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them to wholeness and restore to them all of the attributes, qualities of an emotional life and of a spiritual walk that reflects Jesus Christ. For those who have come to this service today searching for answers in their life—who maybe have recently been through some deep hurt or depressing dark valley, or just reaching out to search—that somewhere they could find answers and get an handle on life. We pray that, as we come to this time of conclusion, they'll just release a prayer to You. "O Jesus, I am here. I open my life to You and to experience Your presence. I know that I cannot put things together. Only You can." I pray that Your healing and Your presence will enter their life as that prayer is prayed. For those who will come now to this moment of prayer with special needs in their body or other areas of their life, we ask You to be present. You are our Healer. You are the Restorer of our spirit and soul and body. We give ourselves to You afresh, that You might work Your perfect work in our lives. We ask this in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.