

## Agents of Restoration

2 Corinthians 13:11-14

Some years ago, an angry man stormed through a Museum in Amsterdam until he reached Rembrandt's famous painting "Night watch." Shockingly, he took out a knife and slashed it repeatedly before he could be stopped. A short time later, a distraught, hostile man slipped into St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome with a hammer and began to smash Michelangelo's beautiful sculpture The Pieta. These two cherished works of art were severely damaged.

What do you think the keepers of these works of art did after they were damaged? Did they throw them out and forget about them? Absolutely not! Using the best experts, who worked with the utmost care and precision, they made every effort and spared no expense to *restore* these treasured works of art.

How many of you know, man, made in God's image is the pinnacle of His creative work. But since the fall of man in the garden, sin has brought ruin and devastation to humanity. Yet, God did not give up on His creation. He made a way by His grace and through His Son to restore the ruin that came from man choosing their own way, rather than the way of a love relationship with their creator.

As God promised His exiled people returning to Jerusalem where the Temple was in ruins, God can give beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair (Isaiah 61:3). Some people see broken things as only good for the trash heap. Others see beyond the brokenness to what can be. This is the heart of God.

God will bring final judgement to this fallen world. But when God sent Jesus into the world, He didn't come to condemn the world, but in order that the world through Him might be saved. When God looks upon fallen humanity, He sees more than sin and brokenness. He sees what His restoring grace can do in and through the lives of all who believe (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Beloved, what is true of God, ought to be true of all who have been made new by the saving grace of Jesus. As believers who have been restored, we are called to see people not as they appear right now, but for what and who they can become. No one is too broken for God. There is grace potential in everyone.

**Main idea:** God's love in our hearts gives us eyes to see the grace potential in everyone and the passion to be instruments of restoration in this fallen world.

To unfold this theme, we are going to learn from Paul's final words to the Corinthian church how God's people become agents of restoration in the church and in our fallen world.

## 1. Make a choice to always rejoice

As Paul closes his letter to what can be characterized as a dysfunctional church, a letter in which he confronted head on some of the dysfunction, he gives a series of rapid-fire exhortations. These imperatives, as we will see, were aimed at restoring the fractured relationships in the church.

With this in mind, the first point that I want us to see about agents of restoration is that they make a choice to always rejoice. What is the first exhortation that Paul gives to this fractured church in need of restoration? Paul writes: "*Finally, brothers, rejoice.*" (2 Corinthians 13:11).

What does **rejoicing** have to do with **restoration**, which is the next exhortation that comes immediately after rejoice? To answer this question, we need to also ask, what is Paul exhorting the Corinthians to **rejoice** about?

Notice that just a couple of verses before Paul writes, "*For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for*" (2 Corinthians 13:9).

What an incredible, other worldly thing to say! In chapter 12:15, Paul also shared something very similar about his heart for the Corinthians when he wrote: *“I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls.”*

Paul didn't resent the physical and emotional exhaustion that he sometimes experienced in ministry. Rather, he was glad to sacrifice and suffer in his ministry to the Corinthians, especially when he saw the fruit that resulted through his labor of love in their lives.

One of Paul's greatest joys in life was to see his spiritual children walking in truth and being restored in the Lord. Their restoration made his sacrifices worth it all.

Let me ask you, outside of family, do you find joy and satisfaction in sacrificing for the good of others? This is the heart of a restorer.

When explaining why he delayed his visit to Corinth, and sent a letter of correction instead, Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 2:3: *“And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all” (2 Corinthians 2:1-3).*

Beloved, Paul could rejoice in his sacrifices because he chose to focus not on the problems in the church, but on what the grace of Christ had already done in the lives of the Corinthians and by faith he also rejoiced in what the grace of God would accomplish as he continued his sacrificial ministry among them.

Likewise, in his closing words, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to rejoice, which required that they change their focus. They could rejoice, if instead of playing the comparison game, or looking to the wisdom of man, or listening to the negativity of his detractors, they choose to focus with gratitude on what the grace of God had done and will continue to do in their lives as they remained devoted to Christ.

It's important to note that when Paul says to the Corinthians in verse nine, "*For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong*" he doesn't mean that he never felt the pain of being falsely accused or betrayed by those he loved. Although Paul derived great joy from seeing the Corinthians transformed by the grace of Jesus, his ultimate joy and security was found in his own devoted relationship with Christ.

As we will see in the closing verses, because he knew the joy of fellowship with Christ through the Spirit, He could absorb the pain, which is what Christ did for us, and continue to labor in love so that the Corinthians could know the greater joy of fellowship with Christ. Remember, the secret, as Elizabeth Elliot put it, is Christ in me, not me in a different set of circumstances.

As he also explained in Philippians 4:11, Paul learned to be content in all circumstances, which gave him the ability to look out for the interests of others and not just his own. I want to suggest to you that learning to be content in all circumstances necessitates being grateful for the grace of God in your life.

Moreover, when we make a choice to focus on the goodness and grace of God in our lives, rather than on our problems, we will be able to rejoice in all circumstances. Gratitude leads to rejoicing.

To put in another way, choosing to count your blessings, rather than your problems, brings contentment and joy.

And gratitude, which leads to rejoicing is foundational to becoming agents of restoration, especially as it relates to unity in the church. To be agents of restoration, sometimes we must sacrifice what we want in order to meet the needs of another, which Paul did with joy.

How many of you know, you will struggle to have healthy relationships if you're the type of person who always has to have it your way. The reason you may be having a hard time connecting with others is because of a lack of joy in your own heart. When you don't know the joy of the Lord you will likely be hard to please.

Let me ask you, where does the strength to be a restorer and a peacemaker come from? What gives us the motivation to put the interests of another above our own, to not insist on our way, to agree to disagree in a loving and respectful way for the sake of Christ? The joy of the Lord is our strength.

After appealing to two sisters in Christ who were in conflict to work out their differences, Paul writes in Philippians 4:4-5: *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. 5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.”*

Again, when Paul exhorts believers to rejoice in the Lord always, he’s not saying that we should never feel sorrow from a loss or the pain of being in conflict with a loved one. However, although we will experience sorrow because of the changing circumstances of life, we can find joy always in the unchanging person and promises of Jesus Christ.

Beloved, to rejoice is a choice. It’s a choice because in difficult circumstances and conflicts we can choose to rejoice knowing that Jesus will always be with us. We can remember what Jesus has done for us, and the promise that He is working through our trials to fulfill His good purpose in our lives.

If we look to circumstances or even other believers as our primary source of happiness, we are going to be disappointed. And it will be very difficult for us to move beyond the disappointment. Instead, we will likely become bitter and resentful.

But when we make a choice to rejoice in the Lord always, we are able to get past ourselves and work through conflicts graciously. When our ultimate joy is found in the Lord, we can be reasonable in our relationships with others, including people we disagree with (Philippians 4:5a). We won’t write people off when they don’t meet our expectations.

Instead, when we learn to rejoice in all circumstances by choosing to count our blessings, we can do our part to restore unity in our relationships with others.

## 2. Make it your aim to pursue restoration

Secondly, when you're an agent of restoration, you make it your aim to pursue restoration. After exhorting the Corinthians to rejoice, the next imperative Paul gives is to "*Aim for restoration*, followed by a series of related imperatives. The related imperatives are, "*comfort one another, agree with one another, [and] live in peace;*" (2 Corinthians 13:11).

I want to suggest to you that these series of imperatives are the necessary practices that bring about the restoration of unity in the church and in relationships in general. There was a lot of relational hurt in the Corinthian church because of disobedience, discord and division. Therefore for unity to be restored not only was repentance necessary but also forgiveness.

When advocating on behalf of a man in the church who had previously been disciplined for his sin, but had come to repentance, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 2:6: "*For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.*" 2 Corinthians 2:6-8

And again Paul exhorts the church at the close of his letter to *comfort one another*, which in at least one case required expressing the comfort of forgiveness and the reaffirmation of love.

As Chuck Swindoll explains, "We forgive when we speak words of liberation to the offending party: '*I forgive you. We are putting this behind us and moving on.*' We comfort when we come alongside those who offended us, not only forgiving them for their wrongs, but offering to help them rebuild and strengthen areas of weakness. We reaffirm when we **restore** them to their former level of relationship,

inviting and involving them in our lives, trusting them with the rights and privileges they had before. Of course, every time we forgive like this, we risk. They may fail us again. We may place our trust on an unreliable soul. But that's grace. Grace is risky."

In addition to the exhortation to "*comfort one another*," Paul exhorts them to "*agree with one another*." This doesn't mean that the Corinthians were to compromise truth to get along. It was because they were not holding fast to the Apostles' teachings that they were being led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ and one another.

Therefore this command to "*agree*" with one another, as Hughes explains, "was not a call for harmony for the sake of harmony, but for unity in the apostolic truth that Paul has been teaching in this letter. They were to agree with one another on the main things, not on everything. This meant that God's Word must be the standard and the source of unity."

Notice also that after the exhortation to *agree with one another*, Paul also adds, "*live in peace*," which is the fruit of the previous imperatives to *comfort one another* and *agree with one another* in accordance with the word of God.

It's important to emphasize that Paul did not expect for the Corinthians to carry out these relationship restoring imperatives in their own strength. Although restoration of relationships and maintaining unity takes continuous work, it's a work that God joins.

As Paul adds at the end of verse 11, when these *unity building* and *relationship restoring* imperatives are being lived out "*the God of love and peace will be with you*" (2 Corinthians 13:11).

Beloved, when in dependence upon the grace of God we practice these imperatives with the goal of being God's instruments of restoration, we can trust that the God of love and peace will be with

us, that He will work through us to bring comfort and peace to our others, that He will use us to restore broken lives and relationships.

Now in verse 12 Paul adds yet another exhortation at the close of his letter that is easy to just gloss over. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to: *“Greet one another with a holy kiss”* and then follows that up with, *“All the saints greet you.”*

The restoration that Paul so desired in Christ was one that involved the genuine display of love and affection between brothers and sisters in Christ. They were to welcome one another as Christ had welcomed them.

The cliquish church in Corinth not only needed to be reminded of the loving fellowship that existed outside of their church, they also needed to be reminded of the loving fellowship they needed to cultivate in their own local church. So in addition to sending them greetings from outside their local fellowship, Paul exhorted them in verse 12 to: *“Greet one another with a holy kiss.”*

I appreciate Chuck Swindoll’s thoughts on this: “Their own local church, marred with schisms, desperately needed to foster an environment of acceptance and forgiveness. Even today, in our stiff, hands-off society, in which real personal relationships and life-on-life intimacy are cheapened by online networks, many of us feel afraid to literally reach out and embrace somebody. We would just as soon text them, email them, or leave a voice message. But we need to freely give and receive tangible signs of affection—the squeeze of a hand, a friendly embrace, a genuine expression of affirmation. One of the best ways to truly communicate our love to others is through personal presence and tangible contact.”

According to a recent Gallop poll, church attendance is still not back to pre-pandemic levels. “It is not clear if the pandemic is the cause of the reduced attendance or if the decline is a continuation of trends that were already in motion. However, the temporary closure of churches and ongoing COVID-19 avoidance activities did get many Americans



out of the habit of attending religious services weekly.” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/507692/church-attendance-lower-pre-pandemic.aspx>

It appears also that many are still choosing to watch church services online rather than being physically present. Thank God for technology which allows some who are unable to attend service to watch online. But virtual church, which is an oxymoron, should not and cannot be a substitute for physical presence and tangible contact.

We need to respect the space of others and never force ourselves upon anyone. But we cannot allow a culture of isolation to dictate the culture of the church or deter us from the loving affection that must be appropriately cultivated in the church for the restoration of the body of Christ and to the praise of His glory and grace.

A few years ago, I heard a church growth guru share on a Christian radio program that churches should eliminate the greeting time in the church. He said it makes people uncomfortable and is not conducive to church growth. Paul would beg to differ.

How many of you know, restoration of relationships requires coming out of our comfort zones to display the welcome of Christ in the power of His love.

Keep in mind also that in Paul’s day the tangible display of welcome and affection took place not in a common meeting place, like our modern church buildings, but primarily in the homes of believers.

This brings us to our final point:

### **3. Make time for cultivating relationships**

As Paul was accustomed to doing, he ends this letter to a church in need of restoration with a triune blessing that is aimed at experiencing the presence of God. In this concluding benediction Paul writes: “*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 13:14*

The primary reason behind the fractured relationships in the church of Corinth was that they had strayed from a pure devotion to Christ. Rather than enjoying a love relationship with God that Jesus made possible through His death on the cross for our sin, they began aligning themselves with their favorite leaders based on their outward appeal to gain prominence and prestige. This only led to division and strife.

But Paul was optimistic that the broken unity in the church of Corinth could be restored. However, it could only be restored if the Corinthians were continuously renewed by the grace, love, and fellowship found in their eternal relationship with the one true God, through His Son, Jesus Christ, and by the communion of the indwelling Holy Spirit.”

Remember, that Paul wrote this letter to bring much needed instructions and correction to a church that because of a lack of love, was not displaying the unity that must characterize the church of Christ. And because of the lack of love that is manifested through the Holy Spirit, they were poor witnesses to the world of the reconciling power of the gospel.

As Adrian Rogers suggested: “Far more damage is done in our churches by those who are not Spirit filled than those who are drunks. Far more harm is done by people who are trying to do the work of God in their own flesh.”

It’s important to note that the instructions Paul gives for how to be healthy Christians, who make up healthy churches devoted to restoration was not something they could do in their own strength. And neither can we. You cannot give what you don’t have. This is why Paul concludes his letter with this powerful benediction for them to know the grace, love and fellowship found in the restoring presence of God.

The Apostle Paul understood that the only thing that could heal the disunity in the church was for the grace of God to be with them. It's important to note also that Paul not only ends his letters with the benediction *the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you*, which was a common practice, he also began his letters by writing, *grace to you* (2 Corinthian 1:2).

Again, his prayer at the start of his letter is grace to you, and his prayer at the end of his letter is grace be with you. And the point is that Paul trusted that through the public reading of this letter, which was inspired by the Holy Spirit, grace would be imparted to the Corinthians in order to strengthen them to be the people that God called them to be.

A community that experiences the love of God by the grace of Christ and through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, will be compelled to share the love of God with one another.

## **Conclusion**

As believers we can know His love more deeply through the grace that comes as we make time to cultivate intimacy with God and one another in prayer and the word, as we make it our aim to pursue restoration and as we make a choice to rejoice in the Lord in all circumstances.

Remember that our first calling as believers is not to Christian service, but to intimacy with Christ. Restorative ministry is the overflow of intimacy.

Let us faithfully and intentionally draw near to God and one another by prioritizing *being together* when the church assembles and by welcoming each other in our homes so that His love restores our souls and enable us to be His agents of gospel restoration in this fallen world.