

A Merciful Purpose in the Pursuit of Joy

Westview Church | 2 Corinthians 1:23-24 | Pastor Brett Toney | February 15, 2026

The Unity of the Table

This morning we are going to start at the end. We are coming to this Table together again—another week, another Sunday. A little sip; a little cube. One church. In 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul described this Table as causing only *one* division: between Christians and non-Christians (11:19). He described the unity of this Table in this way, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, *we who are many are one body*, for we all partake of the one bread” (10:16-17). Church, we are so unified as one *because* we eat the bread together, *because* we participate in Christ together. It is that unity together that Paul is building on in 2 Corinthians 1 to encourage this church in Corinth to trust him. And it is that unity that the Apostle would have us, *Westview Church*—he would have us walk in that unity as we labor in the lives of one another to convey the mercy of God for our firm joy in the faith.

Paul has a clear conscience, 1:12. He has no qualms with how he ministers in line with the very character of God, vv.15-22. So sure is he of *his* conduct and *God’s* character, that in our two verses for this morning, he takes an oath on himself to confirm that he meant to spare the Corinthians and labor for their joy. Like them, we also far too easily import false motive and willful harm on to others who are trying to convey the mercy, faith, and joy of the Triune God to us. We all do it—I do it. Yet through these verses, Paul leads us to labor in the lives of others for a merciful purpose in the pursuit of joy. We see he has a merciful purpose in v.23, and his pursuit of joy is in v.24.

A Merciful Purpose (2 Corinthians 1:23)

Paul had previously called on his conscience as witness of his conduct. And here in v.23 he calls God as witness. However, this is not just pointing to God as an eye-witness of sorts. Paul is invoking an oath. This is shorthand for a longer oath like what you will come across reading the Old Testament, “May God do so to me and more also!”¹ He is saying, “I call God against my own life!” But before we get to Paul’s merciful purpose, who is this God he is invoking and why would this have any bearing on the Corinthians’ relationship with him? Paul has just made a profound statement about this witnessing God in v.21-22, “It is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.” There is no fanfare to this statement, yet Paul makes a profoundly Trinitarian declaration here. God the Father establishes Christians like you and me *in Christ*, God the Son, anointing and sealing us in God the Spirit. The Trinity is not an obscure doctrine for academics—it is the basis of our relationship to one another. We are not a church—we are not Christians—apart from the Trinity.

Think of it this way: the Trinity is like—hold on, that’s how a lot of heretical statements start. Let me try again. Our unity together in the Triune God—that’s better—is like a tether ball pole. We got a tether ball set for our kids for Christmas. It’s still in a box in the garage though because the pole needs to be established in concrete in an old tire. I can’t just put the pole in *dry* concrete—it wouldn’t solidify. It needs water poured into it. But I can’t just pour wet concrete on the ground and stick the pole down; it needs to be contained in the old tire. You and me, Christian, we are like the dry concrete. We’re flaky and not of much use as separate, dry concrete particles. But God has poured his Spirit into us like water on concrete mix. That new product is bound in Christ like concrete in an old tire and is solidified.

And the pole, the purpose for being solidified by the Spirit in Christ because of God, is to convey mercy in the pursuit of joy. And the way that Paul was conveying mercy was by *not* visiting the Corinthians. He says in 2:1 that he decided to not “make *another* painful visit.” That’s what he was sparing them from. He was relenting from coming to them with severity and judgment for all the trouble they were causing. And he had not explained all this to them before. Parents, we do this all the time, don’t we? We *don’t* do things for our kids that they don’t fully understand why. Chocolate cake is a good thing. But we need to spare our children from chocolate cake when they want it *all* of the time. They may argue it has milk, eggs, wheat, antioxidants in the chocolate We don’t explain at every request how we withhold things from them for their good.

And that merciful principle is true in our work of discipleship as well. There are times when, like Paul, we wisely need to refrain from pressing on with a painful visit. In our setting, maybe that means *not* sending that text message or insisting on that conversation. It might be the wisest path forward to give time to allow the Spirit to convict. Paul relents from his plans so that there would not be another painful visit. There is still sin and division to be addressed. But he wisely discerned that the Corinthians would be better served if he did *not* come but take a different approach. In the challenges you see in that sister you are discipling, do you have a category like Paul of mercifully refraining from pressing on a certain area of her life? It’s not ignoring it. It’s not indefinite. Paul skipped the visit and eventually sent a letter. Think of it like a tactical retreat. A military unit stops advancing on the enemy but doesn’t fully disengage. They pull back to regroup and shift tactics. We need the Spirit’s wisdom to know when it would be merciful to a brother or sister to tactically retreat in our efforts to help one another follow Christ

in all of life. We're in this work together because the Father has established us together in Christ by the Spirit.

In the Pursuit of Joy (2 Corinthians 1:24)

And this work is a pursuit of joy, v.24. If Paul is in the position to give mercy or judgment, the accusation could be leveled against him that he is abusing his apostolic authority. So, he moves to address that with a contrast—"not this, but that." Do you see that? "Not that we lord it ... but we work with you." He isn't domineering but working with. Paul is not "lord." Jesus Christ is. Paul is a fellow-worker. He is a fellow-worker with Silvanus and Timothy in the gospel, but I think he means he is also a fellow-worker with the Corinthians. The word he uses for "we work with you" is where we get our word "synergy." But he isn't using it in the sense of business corporate-speak. "Let's circle back to this question offline so we can build *synergy* between our departments and not default to our silos." Think of it again like concrete. Concrete is a mixture of cement with other crushed rock and sand. Cement alone is brittle and will crack. Rock and sand alone doesn't hold together. Bring cement and rock *together*, and it is very strong. There is synergy there. They work together for a purpose.

And Paul's purpose is the Corinthians' purpose. They both want joy. We all want joy. We all do what we think will make us happiest. The Corinthians don't need to be persuaded to pursue their own joy. They are doing that already. But they need to be persuaded that *Paul* is pursuing *their* joy. He is seeking their greatest good by not visiting. He is seeking their greatest good because they are established together in Christ. And their greatest good, your greatest good, is the object of your faith: Jesus Christ. Neither Paul nor I nor those who disciple you are lord over your faith but labor for your faith, for your joy in Jesus. Is that *your* disposition towards those *you* are discipling? The guys in your Discipleship Group, your children, your unbelieving

neighbor—do you interact as a supreme authority, being not only the dispenser of mercy but exacter of punishment? Or are you a coworker for joy? A domineering discipler will dictate exactly what faithful obedience looks like. A coworker for joy will point you to treasuring Christ as you work out your faith in fear and trembling together (Philippians 2:12). A domineering discipler will be disappointed when you fail to meet *their* expectations. A coworker for joy will be grieved that you drink from a broken cistern rather than the spring of life (Jeremiah 2:13).

O that we would labor together for one another's joy in Jesus. O that we would spur one another on in such faith, because it is by faith that we are standing firm. I think the end of v.24 could be improved upon in this translation. It sounds like the focus is on the solidness of your faith. What of the saint struggling with doubt? I think what Paul is actually conveying is that it is *by faith* that the Corinthians are standing firm. Faith is the means. Christ is the foundation. Even if faith is fledgling, you have been established by God in Christ and are therefore standing firm. Your joy might not be overflowing but Christ is your treasure. So, don't look to the firmness of your faith but the object of it. Look to Christ! Through his death and resurrection he has bound us together in himself. And we are working together for one another's joy in him.

By Faith at the Table

Laboring in the lives of others for a merciful purpose in the pursuit of joy—it does not happen apart from faith. Standing firm does not happen apart from faith. It is by faith that makes you able to come to this Table *together*—established together in Christ by God through the anointing and sealing of his Spirit. That unity Christ accomplished through his blood and body is the basis for us to have mercy towards one another, towards those *we* disciple in the Lord, towards those who disciple *us*. It is that unity together in Christ that spurs us on to conspire together for one another's joy and advancement in the faith. I'm laboring for *your* joy. *You* are

laboring for mine. *We all* are laboring for the joy of one another to expand and find its fullness in Jesus Christ, the one in whom we are established together. So, Church, as we participate in the Cup and in the Bread this morning, I want to encourage you to look around at your brothers and sisters to whom you are united. You ought to mercifully labor for their joy even as they labor for yours. May God give us the grace to do so.

¹Cf. Ruth 1:17, 1 Samuel 14:44, 2 Samuel 3:35, 2 Samuel 19:13, 1 Kings 2:23