



## **A COVENANT BLESSING** **2 Corinthians 13:14**

Good morning. Let me invite you to find your seats, and before, "If you have a Bible, and I hope you do", I want to take a moment for us as a faith family to affirm and pray for men around this room on this Father's Day. Obviously, in our culture today, and not just in our culture, but in the church, there is a desperate need of the picture of humility and holiness of Christ in men. Our families and in the faith family we call the church, there's a great need for men who love Christ with wholehearted abandon, who are deep in His Word, and are following after Him radically, turning aside from that which this world says is success and running after that which Christ says is success.

So, in just a moment, much like we did on Mother's Day, I'm going to invite men across this room, regardless of whether you're a father or not, regardless of whether you're married or not, regardless of what age you are, I want to ask from the youngest to the oldest men in this room to stand in just a moment, and we are going to pray specifically for men across this faith family.

Now, on Mother's Day we had an opportunity to really express to the ladies how thankful we are for them and how much we praise God for them. So, I'm just thinking it's appropriate...this is totally self-serving, I realize...but I think it would be appropriate to give an opportunity for the ladies in this faith family to express glory to God for the men in this faith family. So, men, I would like to invite you to stand with me, and ladies, to give you an opportunity to thank God for them now. You feed our fragile male egos well, thank you. You guys stay standing. We're going to pray; we're going to pray, and I want to pray for us.

Father, we as men across this room are desperate for you, and in a society and a culture that says we are to assert ourselves, Father, we gather together today, and today, we deny ourselves. You are Lord. You are King, and our place as men is at your feet, and we pray, God, that you would make us holy and that you would conform us into the image of Christ, that we might be a clear display of His character to the world around. God, that you would give us grace and spurn the pleasures and pursuits of this world in favor of pursuing you.

Father, I pray across this room and this faith family, you would raise up husbands who indeed love our wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her. Help us, we pray, to our serve our wives. You would raise us up as dad's who do not exasperate our children, but who love them, care for them, and lead them in a way that shows our children a clear picture of what it means for you to be Father. We pray that you restore a biblical picture of manhood in your church in our day, and you would do it in our lives across this room. We commit ourselves to you on this Father's Day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

You guys can be seated. If you have a Bible, and I hope you do, let me invite you to open to 2 Corinthians 13. We have spent the last four months exploring God's Word to see what is unique about God's people, what sets the church apart from every other organization, every other assembly, every other gathering, every other group, every other religious group. The

church, literally, is unique in all of creation. It's a story of God's people throughout redemptive history. He has created in His people that which is uniquely a display of His glory, so what makes us unique?

I remember in college, I was with a group of guys and we were discipling them, and we were walking through the book of Romans, and I shared this story one night at the Secret Church, and I was reminded of it here in 2 Corinthians 13:12 and Romans 16:16, both those verses say to greet one another with a holy kiss. I remember sitting there with these guys on the back porch of my apartment in college, and one particular guy...and you just have to know him to know the level of sincerity with which he asked this question. We were looking at that verse at the end of Romans, and he said, "This is a command in Scripture. 'Greet each other with a holy kiss.'" He said, "I've been thinking about it. This is obviously something that made the early church distinct, their affection for one another, their love for one another."

He asked me, he said, "Why don't we do this today if it's commanded in Scripture?" It got awkward really quick, and I began to pull out my defenses, all of my interpretive techniques as to why that just doesn't apply today. "It's a different culture, a different time; we need to get the thrust of what Paul meant behind this. He wasn't telling us we are commanded to kiss one another." I was using everything I could, and he was not persuaded. He kept saying, "This is what the Word says, and it's something that would make us distinct." I said, "Yes, it would make us distinct, but in all the wrong ways."

So, he pressed, he pressed...he pressed on. So, finally, I gave up. I got to the end and said, "Listen man, if this is a matter of conscious for you, and if you feel like you are disobedient in this by not participating in this act, then you can kiss me when we leave, okay?" Extremely awkward, guy's discipleship group that night. So, we finished up. We studied on, and we finished up, and they were leaving the apartment, and I don't know why this was so awkward because this is greeting, not leaving, but as he was walking out, he turned around, and I looked at him and our eyes locked, and I immediately knew what he was thinking. I was frozen dead in my tracks. This is like a story, being on a date with a girl, and this awkward moment, but this is with a man in my discipleship group.

So, he looks at me and pauses, and I look at him and pause and, all of a sudden, he starts to dart toward me. I don't move. I freeze in my tracks. He comes towards me. He kisses me on the cheek, and he runs out of the apartment. The only time this happened, for the record, that this man kissed me, but it happened that particular evening.

This is not what makes us distinct, verse 12. What I want us to look at this morning is verse 14. I want us to think about what we have explored over the last four months, all that we have seen. You have in your notes the church covenant, and unfortunately, the last paragraph at the end, which is what we are talking about this morning, got cut off printer wise, and so we don't even have the part that we are looking at this morning, but what I want to do is, even what you have there, I want you to think about where we have been in God's Word.

Look at this covenant. Think about what makes us as a church distinct, not just as the church universal, but, "As The Church at Brook Hills, we affirm this covenant with one another by God's grace, for our good, and ultimately for God's glory." We looked at Nehemiah 9 and 10. Remember, this covenant is an expression. An expression of what God's Word defines us as.

"...God's grace, for our good, and ultimately for his glory. Having been brought by divine grace to repent and to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and to surrender our lives to Him..." This is how Scripture describes what it means to be a follower of Christ. All of these other words that we have come up with and phrases that we have created that miss biblical conversion, Christianity. "...and having been baptized as Christians in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." Hasn't it been great to see men and women baptized, week after week after week, as we have walked through this series. "...we covenant together to glorify God by making disciples of all nations." That phrase sums up who we are.

Then, we looked at Hebrews 10, and we saw three "Let us" phrases. "Together, we will draw near to God in worship. We will delight in the glory of God, depend on the presence of God, grow in the knowledge of God, and submit to the Word of God as the all sufficient authority in our lives and in His church." We are a God-centered community, not man-centered. Man is not the starting point in church; God is the starting point. We are not devoted to man, devoted to the world of man. No, we're devoted to God, devoted to the Word of God. His Word guides, leads, creates, directs, transforms us. God-centered.

We celebrate that in communion. "We will, together, hold fast to the hope we profess. We will regularly participate in communion as we solemnly and joyfully remember the past work of Christ on the cross, celebrate the present work of Christ at the Father's right hand, and anticipate the future work of Christ in His return for His bride." By the way, we will be celebrating communion together next week at our Covenant Celebration Sunday.

Then, we are an open-handed community.

Together, we will spur one another on to love and good deeds. We will meet with one another consistently, pray for one another regularly, and serve one another selflessly. We will share each other's joys and bear each others burdens. We will edify one another with our speech and encourage one another with our example. We will humbly and gently confront one another and receive correction from one another in accordance with the New Testament understanding of church discipline and restoration. We will give cheerfully and generously to the support of the church, the relief of the poor, the spread of the gospel through all nations.

Open-handed, not closed-handed. We don't approach church based on what we can get. I want a church with the new, most innovative programs that can entertain me and my family. That's not what drives us. We follow a Savior who gave His life, and we find life in giving life. All of these ways that Scripture talks about.

Last week, we looked at "submitting to Christ through leadership of elders who have been entrusted by God to serve and to care for this body by teaching the Word of Christ to us and modeling the character of Christ before us, and we will affirm deacons as leading servants in the church." The last two sentences in our church covenant, one of them is here in 2 Corinthians 13:14, and the one before that says, "If we move from this local body, we will as soon as possible unite with another local church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant and the principles of God's Word." It's basically saying, "We are finished and done with dating the church and church hopping from one to the next. We want to commit ourselves to a local body, and if God moves us to another local body, then we will commit ourselves to another local body where we will submit to the leadership of Christ in that church." Then, we close with 2 Corinthians 13:14, "*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, Amen.*"

I want to invite you to pull out from the Worship Guide you received when you came in...the prayer card that you received. This is something we did at the end of our time together last week. We wrote down ways that we could be praying for each other. I want you to look on that prayer card, likely anonymous, and it represents someone in this room who is walking through a particular struggle. Looking at these cards is just a reminder of the various needs that are represented on any given Sunday morning.

I want you to have a picture with you, a picture with you to take from this, our last Sunday studying God's Word as a covenant community of faith, as a reminder to pray for this person who you may probably don't know, but also as a reminder of the fact that when we gather together, we're not just sitting shoulder to shoulder to sing some songs and be entertained and move on. We are a family of faith with real needs, real hurts, real desires all across this room and really in need of each other and God has designed it this way. The importance of covenant in community is huge. So, I pray that you'll take this, and you'll pray for this person that you probably don't know, and that you will remember this picture that's represented across this room every single Sunday morning. What I praise God for is that this covenant is not just words on a page, that it's not just needs on a card; you are living this out.

I would point you to two pictures of that over the last couple of weeks, even as we are closing out the series. One email that I received from a woman in this faith family whose mom just passed away. I want you to listen to what she wrote. She said,

I've heard about the importance of the body of Christ, but I just don't think I truly understood its meaning until my mom died. God gave me a crystal clear understanding last month when I spent most of my time in Montgomery with my mother and father in and out of the hospital. I was sending prayer requests and updates to my faith family at Brook Hills, hoping they would find a little spare time in their day to think and pray for my family.

The response was unbelievable. I was constantly receiving emails, text messages, and voicemails encouraging me and leaving Scripture messages for me to hold on to during this crisis. I even teased them about my increased cell phone bill, but that did not stop the messages from coming to my phone at all times of the day or evening hours. If I didn't respond quickly, they understood and explained that they were not looking for my response, just sending me an encouraging word or letting me know that they loved me and are continuing to pray for my family, my family that Brook Hills doesn't even know. That meant the most to me knowing that they were strangers to my parents, praying that God would be merciful and gracious during this time and asking God to be with us and give us strength and discernment to make the right medical decisions concerning mom's health. I didn't understand that the body is there, not only to celebrate with us in our times of joy, but the body of Christ is there to weep with me and to encourage me and to lift me up when I feel like I am at the end of my rope. I would check my phone and there would be another message from the body of believers at Brook Hills.

Then, I would know that I could make another decision, I could last another day, because I was not in this alone. Not only did I have Christ holding my right hand, but I had brothers and sisters interceding for me in Birmingham. Then, mother passed away, and my small group starting showing up in Montgomery for visitation and the funeral, and that's when I lost it. I felt strong as long as I was receiving their messages, but when I saw their faces

and their arms stretched out to embrace me, I could feel Christ's love and comfort letting me know I was not alone. Realizing that these people who I worship with on Sunday, and in small group, were not only praying for me and my family, but now they have taken vacation and/or personal time to come and be with me and to grieve with me. Wow. Every night I praise God for my faith family.

You see the picture there, vertical and horizontal. God's deep love expressed through a people's great care. It's one picture, and then this last week, this is more of an outward picture. This from *ABC News* this week in Birmingham, not sure if you saw this.

Preachers will tell you that you can find God anywhere. Now one church has taken that message literally. People all over Birmingham are opening up their lawns for learning.

"I don't think people really go out anymore and fellowship with their neighbors," said Meg Edwards, member of The Church at Brook Hills. For her discipleship begins at home. Next week she becomes one of 60 local families hosting Vacation Bible School just steps from their front doors. "What a neat way to come and hear the gospel outside the four walls of the church, in a backyard under a tent," Edwards said. The Church at Brook Hills created "Rock the Block", backyard VBS last year wanting to expand its ministry all over greater Birmingham, including lower income areas.

"It's also another neat way to have children experience learning about God and nature under what He created," Edwards said.

I love this sentence...thank you Meg...I love this sentence. "Sometimes you have to be a little bit more radical than your traditional way of doing things." Then, this was the news writer's commentary. "Her goal is to bring Christ to people who may never set foot in the church sanctuary, but may feel right at home in her backyard." Its community and mission, inseparable. It's what the church is about.

So, what I want us to do this morning is something a bit different. I want us to take this one verse, and I want us to meditate. Here's the deal. Over the last four months, we have been through some intense texts: Hebrews 10, Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5. You have studied these texts with the intensity that they require. However, I know in my own personal walk with God, my own quiet time, there are times for study in-depth, turning all over the place. However, then there are also times just for meditation. There's times to let the words of Scripture, sometimes the simplest words of Scripture, just soak into our hearts and to think about it, and to listen to it and to reflect and respond to them.

So, I've asked a couple of leaders in our faith family to help me, and what I want us to do in the next few moments is to meditate on the simplicity of 2 Corinthians 13:14 and the wonder of this benediction, this blessing. It's a Trinitarian picture as Paul writes this book to the church of Corinth and closes out by saying, "*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*" Let it soak in.

"*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ...*" This is where it all begins. This is the core. This is what makes us a community of faith. This is where our whole journey started, isn't it? Hebrews 10, "*Therefore, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place...*" How? "*...by the blood of Jesus.*" He has sprinkled our hearts from a guilty conscious; He has washed our bodies with pure water. That's why we draw near to God in faith. That's why we

hold fast to the hope we profess. That's why we spur one another on towards Christ. Because we have been united by the grace of Christ.

What unites us in this room is the fact that none of us deserves to be here. None of us is here because of our merit, what we have earned, warranted. We are here in spite of us. We didn't even find grace, grace found us. Ephesians 1 and 2, remember when we studied that? Remember what we were? Ephesians 2:1-10, we were dead in sin, lovers of darkness, children of disobedience, doomed to hell. That's what we were with no desire for light, no desire for God. In the midst of darkness and death, God, by His grace, reached down into our lives, and by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, took the payment of our sin and death upon Himself so that it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith, not from yourselves; it is a gift of God so nobody is boasting in this room.

This is why we boast as a community of faith in the cross. That's unique, that's distinct. Amidst the world that says, "Be successful, assert yourself", we boast in an instrument of torture where the Son of God was crucified. We boast in the clearest picture in the severity of our sin because we find in that picture the wonder of His grace. Why? Why has God designed church to be grounded in grace? To be rooted in the grace of Christ? It's what we have seen and celebrated all over Scripture. This is why: Because the One who gives the grace always gets the glory, and God has designed the community of faith to be a tapestry of His grace that resounds to His glory. That what happens in our lives and what happens in this church is all intended to bring great glory to His name.

This is the story of the people of God throughout redemptive history. God doling out extravagant grace for His extravagant glory. It's why David in that incredible picture in the Old Testament of praise to God, after, by the grace of God, being delivered from the Philistines, David leads the people in worship. What does he say to the people? In light of grace,

*Sing to the LORD, all the earth. Proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.*

*For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and joy in his dwelling place. Ascribe to the LORD, O families of nations. Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*

*Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come before him. Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him all the earth.*

*Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let them say among the nations, "The LORD reigns." Let the sea resound and all that is in it. Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; the trees in the forest will sing. They will sing for joy before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth.*

*Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, and his love endures forever. Cry out, "Save us, O God, save us by your grace and deliver us from the nations that we may give thanks to your holy name; that we may glory in your praise. Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting.*

This is the picture across this room. We have been delivered from sin, we have been saved from sin, we have been forgiven of our sin, and we have been freed from sin. Our lives resound to the glory of the One who has saved us. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ results in extravagant glory to God.

So, I want to invite you...I want to invite you to spend a moment reflecting on His grace in your life; what you were, what you now are. Your present need for Him and all the struggles and difficulties and battles that are represented around this room today, and for us to celebrate His grace for His glory.

Father, we pray that you will help us to remember the wonder and the beauty of grace. Lord Jesus, we praise you as the risen and exalted King who has paid the price for our sins that we might be a community of faith today. So, we express our need for your grace and our gratitude for your grace today, as a community of faith. Father, I pray...I pray for people who may be spread out throughout this room who do not know your grace. I pray that they would feel welcome in this place, and I pray that they would see that, today, they would glimpse the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that you might draw them from death and sin to life in Christ. Today, we sing this anthem of this your grace as we celebrate your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Will you stand with me? I want to invite you to reflect, to respond to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Deric Thomas:* Praise God for the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Praise God for His love for us, His covenant people, and praise God for the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul wrote these words to the covenant community, the Church in Corinth, over 1900 years ago, around A.D. 56. These are the words of Paul to the Church at Corinth, but these are not just the words of Paul, for he wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, they are the words of God for His covenant community then, for His covenant community here in Birmingham today, and for His people forevermore.

*"The grass withers and the flowers, they will fade, but the word of our God will stand forever."* In light of the fact that these words in 2 Corinthians 13:14 are the words of God, every single word is important. The words that I will look at this morning with you are *"...and the love of God..."*

Let's look at that word "and" first. Look at the passage. "And", "and". What does that mean? Well, preceding that, we have already looked at the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, this great grace that has pardoned us from all of our sins. This grace that has been lavished on us. And? Yes, and. There is more additionally to this grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. "...and the..." The? Yes, "the". There is no other "the" that we are about to talk about. There is no comparison to the "the" that we are about to dive into. It is one of a kind. It is unique.

What is it? I'm glad you asked. Look at the passage. "Love". This Greek word "*agape*", love. Now, I know what you're thinking. You hear this word, "love", often, right? It's the people who say, "I love chocolate", or "I love watching 'Jon and Kate Plus 8.'" Or, "I love the LA Lakers, especially when they win." All of these things that people love, but that is not what God means by love when He says, "I love my people." It's not what the young man means when he looks at the young lady, and he says, "Girl, I love you.", and what he means is, "Well, I want to use you to gratify my own desires."

If you'll remember in the Greek language, there are four words for "love". One is "*storgae*", that is "a bondness, and affection." Another is "*eros*". That's more an erotic and sexual love.

That's the love that that young man was talking about. There's another type of love. It's "*philiaeo*"; it's a friendship love. It's, well, in a distorted form, kind of like the young girl that came up to my wife at her ten year high school reunion a couple months ago, and this young woman came up to her and, well, she had had a little bit too much to drink. She looked at my wife who she hasn't seen in years, and she said, "Girl, I love you." That distorted form of "*philiaeo*". That's not what God means when He says He loves His covenant people. He "*agapes*" them.

What does "*agape*" mean? Well, I've, kind of, this week been studying what Scripture says in a concordance and been looking at, "Hey, what does love of God...what does that mean?" I've put together a little definition I want to read to you. It goes like this:

God's love is His everlasting, self-giving affection and passion for His people and His unselfish concern for their well being. That leads Him to act on their behalf and for their happiness and their welfare despite their unlovely sinfulness and their unlovable behavior. God's love is an exercise of His goodness towards individual sinners, whereby, having identified himself with their welfare, He has given His Son to be their Savior. Now, He brings them to know and enjoy Him in covenant relation. God loves them because He chooses to love them, not because He needs them. He does not need to have someone to love because He freely chooses and wants to lavish His love on them for their everlasting good and for His everlasting glory.

That's kind of a formal definition of this word, "*agape*."

However, I want to give you another picture. I want to take that formal definition, and I want to go from a little history lesson in redemptive history. Let's start with Ephesians 1:4 that says God has set His affections on His people before the foundations of the world. That's even before they were born. Before the world was ever created, it tells us...you go check it out...that He loved, "*agaped*" us, before we were born. Genesis 1, 2, 3 says that God loved His people, Adam and Eve, who were made in His image; He loved them, and they walked with Him in the cool of the garden. He "*agaped*" him, and yet, they sinned and fell. They listened to the words of another counselor, the serpent who deceived them, and he lied to them, and they rebelled, and they fell from their state of grace, and yet, God still "*agaped*" them.

He loved them, and He protected them. He provided clothing for them with a sacrifice that had been killed. He covered their shame and their guilt and their fear. He made a promise to them. He said, "The seed of the woman will come, and that baby, that seed of the woman, will crush the head of the serpent and all of the enemies of God." That's "*agape*".

Fast forward, Genesis 11 and 12, you have a man named Abram who lives in a pagan land. A pagan man in what would be present day Iraq. God comes to him and says, "Abram, I'm going to take you from this land, because I love you, and I'm going to change you, and you're going to become my son. I'm going to bless you, Abram, and you're going to be Abraham, and in you, Abraham, all of the nations of the earth are going to be blessed." That's "*agape*".

Fast forward: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, all the way to Malachi. You have the Israelites. They've come into the Promised Land, this piece of property God told them He would give them. He freed them from Egypt and from bondage and slavery and, ultimately, to sin. He led them into the wilderness, and there in the wilderness, they grumbled and complained, but He continued to feed them with manna from heaven. He

continued to give them drink with water from the rock. He passed over their sins when they sacrificed the lamb. He loved them. He brought them into the land through the Spirit-anointed leadership of Joshua. They got there, and the land was flowing with milk and honey, and the fruit was big, and the crops were plentiful, and they had peace and prosperity. God had gone before them and fought their battles for them. He had given them victory.

Yet, gradually, their hearts began to turn from Him, this God who had "agaped" them. They began to worship the creation rather than the Creator, and they erected idols whether they were statues like the golden calf or false demonic gods like Molech or Ashtoreth. Or, even if they took the very things that God had blessed them with in relationships in family and material things, they began to worship them instead of the God who gave them. God sent them away into exile. He used the wicked people to capture them, but God, He still "agaped" them, and He came to them in the voice of the prophets, and He said, "Listen, there is One who is coming, and He will free you."

Do you hear that? It's the cry of a baby in Bethlehem who's just been born. Some thought, "Maybe this is the Christ; maybe this is the Promised One, maybe this is the Messiah." Others wondered; they watched. He grew in stature and in favor with God and with people. He knew the Torah, the Law, better than anybody else. He not only knew the law, but He obeyed the law. Nobody could obey the Torah perfectly; He did. He was tempted in all ways like we are.

He was brought into the wilderness just like the Israelites. Unlike Adam and Eve who were in the garden, they were in paradise and they fell. The Israelites were in the wilderness, they grumbled and complained, and they fell. Jesus was in the wilderness. He was hungry, and He was tempted, and He said, "No, you shall worship the Lord your God only, and him only shall you serve."

Look at the way that He loved people. Look at the way that He loved God. Why are they putting him on a cross? "Mom, you said that He was the hope of the world. You said that He was the Messiah, the Christ. Lord." "We have left everything to follow you. Why are they killing you? You do not deserve to die." Does God love you? Does God love us? Wait a minute, what did He just say? "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Forsaken, God has never forsaken His people. Why is Jesus saying that? Why are they putting Him in the tomb? Is that you? Let me see your hands and your feet. You're alive? Jesus, you're alive? You died in my place as my substitute, and you were raised from the dead, and the Father verified that your sacrifice was sufficient to pay for my sins by raising you. I believe. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. That is "agape".

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever would believe in him would not perish, but would have everlasting life."* "Agape" love is everlasting love. It is the love, the text says, of God. Obviously, the text is a reference to the Trinitarian nature of God. We've seen the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son. We'll see in a moment the fellowship of the Holy Spirit; that's the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Here we see God, obviously the Father, because when He saves His people, He brings them into His family. They become His children, and He becomes their Father.

Now, I know today, it's Father's Day, and you have thoughts of your own father in your mind, and I'm thankful for my father. However, maybe you had a good father, or maybe you had a horrible father, or maybe you don't even know who your father was, but this is not just any father; this is, remember, "the" Father. This is not just any love. This is "the" love.

Turn with me, just to get a glimpse in Psalm 36. Turn with me there, please, Psalm 36. This "agape", this love of the Father, Psalm 36:7. Listen to how the psalmist describes this love. "How precious or priceless is your unfailing love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings." We live in a world with great heat, and I don't know what type of heat you're experiencing right now as a covenant child of God. Maybe it's the heat, the scorch of physical ailments, pain, sickness, disease; maybe it's the heat of abandoned relationships and unfaithfulness. Maybe it's the heat of financial strain and difficulty or maybe even ruin. God is a refuge and His wings are spread, and He says to His people, "I love you and come to me and shelter yourself from the sun that is beating down on you in the shadow of my wings." That's "agape".

Praise God for His love for us! Praise God for the love of the Father! We need a biblical understanding of the love of God. Not one that we have learned from our experience, from television, from media, from false teachers. When we see and meditate on and rest in the love of God, surely it will compel us into great love for the people of God. Surely, it will compel us to love God's people who are in His covenant from every tribe and tongue and nation all over the world. Surely, it will bring us to our knees in thanksgiving and praise to the One who has loved us and given Himself for us. Surely, it will lead us from Monday to Sunday to worship Him, to love Him with our lives. May the Lord's love reign down on you.

*Chris Nichols:* What's that about? What is this document really for? Well, it ought to be a word picture of who we are as the church. It really ought to help us with the question that we might be asked, "Mommy, what does the church really look like? Daddy, what is church mean?" So, this should help us with that answer, this church covenant that we have.

Now, this was kind of a new revelation to me this Friday. I was in Atlanta at the USCIS office in the middle of Atlanta. I was with one of my newly adopted three children, and they were being sworn in. It was a citizenship ceremony. During that ceremony, they basically have to renounce their former citizenship, and they, basically, are pledging an allegiance to this country. It was really a good photo for me in my mind to think about us as the church. To think about how we renounce what we formally were when we come to Christ and who we are now as a family. Basically, from the many they become one.

Isn't that true for us as well? From the many places that God has sovereignly brought us and the grace of Christ and the love of God have brought us together as family, but what does that practically look like? There is a phrase right here that David and Deric have alluded too at the end of 2 Corinthians 13:14, if you will look there with me now. We're going to cover a little further as we talk.

This little final phrase, "...the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.", what does that mean? It's probably like a closing thought that we have glossed over as we have ever read the close of this book, and we've said, "Yeah, right, whatever", and we have shut it, and we haven't really paid attention to what this means, "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit." Is it some kind of coded message? Is it like a force be with you or is it something that is added on for some literary effect?

If you dive off into history, you'll find that it was a pretty common thing in Greek writing in Hellenistic era that the author, and even, people who are not the apostles would close their letters with a farewell wish. However, I believe it's more here. I believe that it's not just a mere wish. I believe that it is a breath of prayer, and that it is a declaration, in some ways, for the Church at Corinth. I believe that it is a word for us in this postmodern church world today.

Basically, I want you to think for me just a minute. Think about Paul's weathered hands. Think about the fact that many times as he would go stitch, pray, stitch, pray. That's what he did. He would pray for the people he loved and in the way that he did that, he is also telling us a message. I think what he's saying here is, "God, would you lead them by your Spirit to a revelation and a realization." What realization is he going for here? There are some various words used in your text if you will look there, 2 Corinthians 13:14. Yours might say, "fellowship of the Holy Spirit", or "in the Holy Spirit." If you are using an older version, "communion with the Holy Ghost", "participation in the Holy Spirit" some messages render it there.

Sharing...they are all based in this Greek word, "*koinonia*". It basically means sharing, community, fellowship. Now, the question for us is, "Does this mean that the fellowship that we have with the Spirit of God in a personal way, or is the question here and the declaration here, is it the fellowship that we have with one another as provided for through the Spirit of God Himself?" The answer to that question is in a word, "Yes", exactly. That's exactly what it says.

See, here's the deal: Look, if you would, Matthew 18, turn there now to the very last part of Matthew. Excuse me, Matthew 28. Matthew 28. Down there about 18, 19, 20. It's the end, and Jesus is ascending to the Father, and He is making a statement to His disciples, and He said, basically, "I'm going and you're staying." However, then look at the very last passage right there. "I am with you, even to the end of the age. I am with you even to the end of the age." This makes no sense whatsoever. "I am going to the Father. You're staying, but I'm with you."

How can He be with us, unless He is speaking of His Spirit's presence with us in a very personal way. John 14:16 says it even more clearly. Let me read this to you. You don't have to turn there. Jesus says, "*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another helper that he may be with you forever. That is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive.*" Then, He closes this passage out and listen to these words that He says: "*He abides with you and will be in you.*"

Now, what about some other sections of the Scriptures that speak to how God's fellowship of His Spirit is with us in a very personal way? What about Romans 8:26, "*In the same way also, the Spirit also helps our...*" What? "*...our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.*" Groanings too deep for words. So, if He knows our prayers before we breathe them, is He not...the Spirit of the living God...is He not with us in a completely personal way, in a completely deep way? Completely intimate with us.

You could almost use the word...it's a given, so to speak...His "fellowship" with us. Let me just give you one thought about this. It just occurred to me. It's kind of like living at my house. Just so you know, I have nine children. I have four biological children and five adopted children, so fellowship at my house is a given. Good or bad, timely or not so timely, fellowship is a given there. It was a reality moment for me the other day. Just being completely transparent with you, coming in the basement door, we have cubbies and cubbies really help me manage my life lately. Yeah, cubbies, you know the little boxes where you put your stuff so that it doesn't cross with anybody else's stuff. Preschoolers love them. Parents of preschoolers love them.

As I walked in the basement door the other evening, it was just a pinch me moment: "Are you sure you're the father of nine?" As I counted, I just made it a point to count shoes in the cubbies, and there were 44 pairs of shoes at my basement door. I'm digressing, but let

me just say this: Yes, fellowship, and it's a given. He is with us. It is a given. He is with us personally.

All right, let's go a little further. Look at this passage with me, 2 Corinthians 13:14. *"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."* Now, everyone of us armchair theologians in this room, we can take a look there, and as David has taught you to do, there is another place in the Scripture that this passage is found. It's found in the book of, what? Take a look there at the cross reference. Cross reference says, Philippians 2. If you want to turn there you can. Philippians 2, you can probably read this along with me. You might be able to say it with me. Philippians 2, starting in verse 1. It says, *"If there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love..."* Here it is,

*...if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind, let each of you regard one another as more important than himself. Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourself which was also in Christ..."*

So, exactly what is he doing with this passage? Fellowship of the Spirit, that's in 2 Corinthians 13:14, and fellowship of the Spirit that's written in Philippians 2. It almost seems like God has led Paul to place, this phrase, "fellowship of the Spirit", and it's sitting in a series of verses that deal completely with how we deal with one another in a relational way. What he's doing is basically saying that if we are people who are in Christ, then this fellowship of the Spirit, it is a marker for us. It drives who we are.

It happens through the course of a relationship. It's not just theological talk. He is talking out the practical outworking of our heavenly position, and it takes place in relationship with one another. You can almost really give a bad metaphor and say that church is a team sport. It's a really bad metaphor, but check it out. Ephesians 1:23, it basically says that the church is the expression of the fullness of God who fills all in all. So, how can this be shown if we are just lone rangers knowing that God's fellowship is with us personally?

See, the deal is this kind of fullness cannot be realized individually. It just won't happen. The Scripture tells us this. So, the flowery ending that Paul has put at 2 Corinthians 13:14, where he says, "Fellowship of the Spirit", is not just some literary sweep; some little clean up device there at the end. It's an indicator of us.

I want you to think about something with me for a minute. This letter was focused on two things. One was the reconciliation of the church at Corinth with Paul. The other aspect was the reconciliation of the Church in Corinth with each other. So, it's completely focused on us and our relationships with one another. With the church there, the work of God shows up for the lost to see through us in our unity with one another. He's best displayed there, and the converse of that is we could basically say that His story among us is destroyed by our disunity. It's testimony is damaged by our broken fellowship with one another. See the thing that breaks fellowship with one another in this room in this body are the things that are not of Christ.

Think about it. They are the selfish things that we just talked about in Philippians 2. They are the thinking of ourselves and not of someone else. They are those things there, the patterns, the prejudice that we have left over from our old life. Maybe they are the social

norms that we've taken as acceptable when they have nothing to do with alignment with His Word. They're the things that break our fellowship. They are the things that take away the unity that is the testimony of the Spirit. What they really are, we could sum by saying, they are the saved self mentality in us that dies a hard death. That's what they are. Galatians 5:17 sums it up...the word...let me just sum it up with this, *"For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh, for these are in opposition to one another so that you may not do the things that you please."*

Do you think that the Apostle Paul could, by God's grace, be doing a look ahead here, and he is looking at us in this era, and he is saying, "They have gone the way of self, rather than that of the Spirit."? This one brother, Chinese brother of ours that lived in the 1900's, listen to what he says; it's a great quote. It's so timely for us. "Love one another is either something within the sphere of the body, that is the church, and therefore, it is Christ-centered or it is wrong. May God save us from uncrucified natural choices and help us in these things to follow the Spirit." A little further down the page it follows it up.

Maybe this is counter to our thinking, but it is very good for us to hear. "God does not therefore tell us to hold fast to our fellow members, but to hold fast to the Head. This is the way of fellowship." See, the thinking is counter to what we normally do. What we normally do is we push the offense under the rug. We push the offense away, hoping that it will never come back, or we muster up our own strength in order to overlook them. We fail every time. It somehow manages to break through.

Here's another way we try to control one another. We try to control the way that we think of the way that we behave in every situation trying to fix every issue among us. We want us to have the same behavior, every thought on every topic, even Paul himself warns against this in 1 Corinthians 12. He says, "You know, one Spirit of God, a variety of outworking of effects."

So, this commonality in a robot way is not the way that the Scriptures teach us about this fellowship. You know what we also do is we end up in His church today, and we succumb to doing everything based on popularity. "You've got what you like. They've got what they like. They've got what they like. Why don't we just do it all?" This is the way we do it, and this is not His way. That's our way. Our way is the way of division, not the way of the fellowship that He provides. See, fellowship in the Spirit, it's really a diverse unity.

What does that mean? A diverse unity? See, Paul is praying for us here, and he is declaring a unity for us here, and it is a fellowship that is other worldly, and the reason it is other worldly is it is completely godly. The fellowship that we want to see is completely focused on God, because it only comes from God. Why don't we begin praying for this? Why don't we begin asking God, "God, would you lead us to fellowship by your method and not our method."? It is a fellowship and based on this covenant that you've looked at. It is a fellowship that's patient and that's long suffering. It is a patience. It is a long suffering way. It is an engaging way. It's submissive. It is confronting. It is restoring. It is giving. Why is it these things? Because it's based in the character of God Himself, and His work in us through the Spirit.

So, when Ephesians 4 says that we need to be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit, what work is there for us to do? Our diligence is to preserve what He's already provided for us. It's His life in us, not our work, that holds us together. His life holds us together, so it seems like our serious role is to watch for Him, to listen to Him, to seek hard after Him. It is His fellowship after all. It's His unity, not ours. Even the theme of this entire book, 2 Corinthians, it's more focused around the Spirit's performance in His church that our

participation in our church. We can only realize fellowship when we trust Him to provide it. Fellowship in the Spirit, yes Lord, that is what we want. By His grace, by His love, through His Spirit, that's what we have.

Let's pray together. God, would you lead us Lord? Lead us to seek you for fellowship, God, not to seek others for fellowship, not to seek our ways for fellowship. Lord, would you just give us grace in this. Show us your love in this, Father, and provide for us through your life in us. We pray this in Christ, Amen.

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