

Trinity—A
2 Corinthians 13:11-14
Meaningful Relationships: As easy as 1,2,3!

How many relationships do you have in your life? Count them up: father, husband, son, grandson, friend, neighbor, citizen, Christian, co-worker. That is just 9, and the list can keep growing for many of you. Our relationships take time, care, and concern for them to produce love and peace in our life. Relationships are hard work. Imagine a husband and wife crawling into bed on separate sides of the room. They quickly turn their faces toward the walls away from each other. They are on the farthest possible edge of the bed they can sleep on without falling off. They lie motionless so as not to accidentally touch. The wife quickly says, “Why didn’t you fix the vacuum again?” The husband shoots back, “Well, why did you shrink all my shirts?” “If you wouldn’t just sit on the couch every night, the shirts would still fit.” The husband is burning up inside with resentment. “That’s it! I work all day and come home to this?” He storms out of the room with his pillow. As the wife sees him leave the room she whispers under her breath, “We’ve grown apart. We don’t know each other anymore.”

When a relationship is neglected, love and peace are just memories. Relationships take hard work to bring love and peace into the everyday lives of sinful people. In our text for today the apostle Paul along with our God, have the solution to restoring a fulfilling Christian relationship. It is hard work, but I think you will see it is as easy as 1,2,3! The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ 2) The love of God and 3) The Fellowship of the Holy Spirit!

You may be thinking to yourself, “What does a first century Corinthian Congregation know about relationships?” The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church in his second letter for the exact purpose of restoring broken relationships, or at least dysfunctional ones. Paul had already addressed some of their problems in a previous letter; but he had received a report of more relationship problems that stemmed from their lack of follow-through:

- 1) Unforgiving to a repentant sinner
- 2) second guessing Paul, because he wasn’t that impressive,
- 3) Cowardly going along with the unbelievers in their pagan practices, and
- 4) they had not eagerly collected the mission offering for the struggling churches in Jerusalem like they said they would do.

You see, all the problems or sins that Paul addresses in this letter have to do with Christian relationships: relationships with repentant sinners, relationships with their pastor, relationships with unbelievers, and relationships with other Christians outside their community. Their sins had sucked the blessings out of their relationships. Their relationships didn’t produce the love and peace God had intended them to bring. Their relationships were unfulfilling.

We know how difficult relationship can be. Anyone can have a relationship with someone, but the difficult part is to have a fulfilling relationship where both parties have their needs and wants fulfilled. I want you to look at your relationships: your relationship with your family members, your relationship with me your pastor, your relationship with people outside our faith and your relationship with other Christians. Are those relationships producing love and peace as God intended? Or on the contrary are those relationships producing anger, resentment and strife?

Paul has a solution for us. His solution is rather unique. He told the Corinthian Church that to have fulfilling relationships they must aim for perfection. *“Our prayer is for your perfection”* (2 Corinthians 13:9). The solution to their relationship problems Paul formulated into a prayer. For those Christians in Corinth to realize the great blessings God had packed into each of their relationships they needed to be restored to perfection, they needed to respect him and they needed to be untied in mind. You and I both know that to get two people to agree on anything is usually impossible. We also know that no one is perfect. No one really deserves our respect because all people are sinful. But Paul’s solution to the Corinthian relationship problems is as easy as 1-2-3. His solution we call the apostolic blessing, but it really is a prayer that Paul uses to restore the broken and dysfunctional relationships he found in the Corinthian Church.

When you hear the apostolic blessing; if you are like me, it kind of floats over your head like some lofty romantic cloud, that sounds like God-talk. And we say “Oh, how nice that sounds.” But this prayer is very practical. Let’s look at the first part of that prayer and actually ask ourselves, “What would happen to our relationships if I had more of the grace of our lord Jesus Christ?”

I. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

Who can tell me what the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is? Keep in mind that grace is an undeserved gift. Correct. Paul sums up the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ: *“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich”* (2 Corinthians 8:9). The gift or grace of Jesus is himself. He laid down his divinity with all his God abilities in order to become a man and fulfill the righteousness God demanded for a fulfilling relationship with him. If Jesus wanted to have a relationship with us, he was going to have to be the one sacrifice. We were outside God’s family—foreigners and enemies of God. Every blessing every promise that God made for his children was a no to us. Can you imagine asking your Father for anything and every time he said no? Can I get a drink? No. Can I go to the bathroom? No. Can I watch TV? No. Can I? No. The Bible says that is called exasperating. That is the kind of relationship we deserve and had with our heavenly Father. Can I go to heaven? No. Can I have the assurance that you will not punish me? No. Will you protect me? No. But we have the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave us himself to make us rich. Not rich in money but rich in our relationship with our Heavenly father.

Now we have been restored into God’s family as his children. Now all of God’s promises to his children are a yes to us. *“For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God* (2 Corinthians 1:20). Can I go to heaven? Yes. Do you love me? Yes. Will you protect me? Yes. Will you forgive me no matter what unconditionally? Yes. Will you be with me through all my problems? Yes. What would it mean for your relationships to have more of this grace? For me, the more of this gift I would have the more humble I could be.

Pride, however, is the deal breaker in every relationship. When a child, spouse, coworker, or anyone disrespects me or hurts me in anyway, treating me as unimportant, my pride rages on fire, with resentment and wanting revenge. But Paul told the Phillippians that with more of grace of our Lord Jesus Christ our attitude will be like that of Christ Jesus: humility and self sacrifice. We can be humble because we know that we already have everything in Jesus.

Remember everything is a “Yes” in God’s promises. We are God’s children because of the grace of Jesus Christ. We can say with Paul that we have this treasure in jars of clay. This treasure is all that we need to have a rewarding and fulfilling eternal life. God tells us that his grace is sufficient for us, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

II. The Love of God

How can just this one gift of our Lord Jesus Christ be enough for us and our relationships? It is because of the love of God. What would happen in our relationships if we had more of the love of God? We hear people talk about the love of God and we know “*God is love*” (1 John 4:8). What is the love of God? The apostle John wrote: “*Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins* (1 John 4:8-10).

To me when I think of God’s love the amazing aspect of it is that it enfolds the entire world in the past, present and the future. We all know the famous passage of John 3:16: “*For God so loved the world*” ... We call that God’s objective love. He just loves everyone. Put this together with what we know about people and it gets even more amazing. People change. If you have been married a while, you realize that the person you married is not the same person today. People change. We don’t look the same, we don’t have the same dreams as before, and we don’t have the same needs or wants as before. And yet we are still love and we still keep our promises to each other. At times we wonder why our spouse still loves us, because we have changed so much. But God continues his undeserved love throughout history over all people through every change. And it is not just through changes in people. God’s love even remains constant in the face of sin, pain, suffering, death, and devil. The love of God is one of the promises to us that is a “Yes” in Christ Jesus. Paul reminds the Corinthians “*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed* (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

The love of God runs like a deep underground river bringing fresh water and nutrients undetected by the human eye. Paul warns them: “*You are looking only on the surface of things*” (2 Corinthians 10:7). The love of God and the grace of our lord Jesus Christ convince us that the one who raised the lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus. “*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal* (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Know what would it mean to your relationships to have more of this love of God? The ability to trust and be confident that God who loves the world is taking care of the world on our behalf is a powerful weapon against fear. The love of God is the opposite of fear. Fear says: “What if this person does not love me anymore?” Fear pulls back, so that the pain of rejection won’t be so bad. Love is a very vulnerable position to take. To give yourself to a sinful person is risky business. We know from experience that sinful people hurt us; yes even the ones that say they love us. And when we are hurt we can ball up and crawl into our shells of self-protection; never to love and trust again. But the love of God is a deterrent to fear. We have the promises of God that his love will always be with us, that he will direct the affairs of the world

for our benefit and for the benefit of the world. With the love of God we can love our family, our fellow Christians, and even our enemies.

III. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit

So we know that if we could get more of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and more of the love of God, our relationships would be filled with love and peace. So how do we get this grace and love from Jesus and God? The fellowship of the Holy Spirit! What would happen in all your relationships if you had a better fellowship with the Holy Spirit? Fellowship is a fancy word for friendship. Friendship is something we understand right? When you are friends with someone, you share things together. Friends share toys, time, treasures, and even trouble. Fellowship with the Holy Spirit is something that all Christians have. You see the Holy Spirit is the source of our relationship/friendship with God. The Holy Spirit is the tether that connects us to the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God. The Holy Spirit is the one who makes us children of God, so that all of God's promises can be a "Yes" for us.

"There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:4). We understand that the Holy Spirit is the power behind our friendship with God or our fellowship with the Triune God, but what we sometimes forget is that the Holy Spirit is the source of our continued relationship with God and with each other. Friendships are a fragile thing. Think about your friends over the years, if you are like me, your friends have been like a revolving door. Because I didn't stay in touch with my friends from grade school, high-school, college, we really aren't close anymore. They may even think I don't care about them anymore. They may not even consider me a friend anymore. My parents are great and I love them dearly. But if my brother and sister or I don't call them for a couple weeks, they get upset. They don't call us. They just get upset. Communication is the key to keeping a friendship alive. If you don't communicate you actually sever the tether that connects your friendship. It is very dangerous to neglect your friendships. How much more dangerous is it to neglect the friendship you have with the Holy Spirit? Paul warns us: *"As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:1-3).* And again... *"As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you. I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:1-2).* Paul assures us that our relationship with God is as easy as 1-2-3. The easy part is that it is all based on the Triune God's work not our own. The hard part is that it calls for our regular attention to be in a constant friendship with the Holy Spirit. This calls for regular use of the means of grace in Word and Sacrament so the Holy Spirit can bring us the love and peace we crave in all our relationships.