FULL RESTORATION

2 Corinthians 12:11–13:14

Key Verse: 13:11

“Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.”

How do you deal with chronic problems? You try hard, over and over again, to fix them, but they just keep happening. It can be so frustrating and discouraging. This can happen to us in many ways, with our possessions, like a rickety old house or a broken down old car that keep needing repairs, or maybe with our health, when our bodies keep getting sick or racked with pain, no matter how hard we try to get better. When this happens with people it can be especially demoralizing. When we or others are committing sins chronically, it can cause us to lose hope. In today’s passage Paul concludes 2 Corinthians by addressing this issue. These believers seemed to have been going back to their old sins chronically and falling into criticizing him chronically. Because Paul loved them, this really grieved him. But Paul found hope in God for these people. We especially want to learn from his words what he meant by “full restoration,” and how it can actually be possible for us, both personally and as a fellowship. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Look at 12:11. Here Paul summarizes what he’s just written. He’s been writing about his extreme sufferings and spiritual experiences to show how he’s depending only on the grace and power of Jesus (11:1–12:10). It’s how any true apostle or servant of Christ lives (cf. 6:4–10). But, boasting about such things made Paul feel like he made a fool of himself. The only reason he did it is because the Corinthians drove him to it with their persistent criticism and suspicion. Paul again says his experiences show he’s “not in the least inferior to the ‘super-apostles’” (11:5)—meaning the top leaders in the Jerusalem church, Peter, John and James the brother of Jesus (Gal2:9). It was another way Paul’s enemies were trying to discredit his leadership behind his back. Paul quickly adds, “even though I am nothing,” confessing that he’s nothing but the worst of sinners but for the grace of Jesus (1Co15:9,10; 1Ti1:13–16).

Look at verse 12. Here he reminds them of how, during his ministry in Corinth, God had worked signs, wonders and miracles through him (cf. Ro15:18, 19). He says he “persevered” in these things. The Bible warns that performing such miracles can sometimes be counterfeit (Mk13:22; 2Th2:9). So perhaps the greatest miracle that happened was how God had changed the Corinthians’ hearts through Paul’s gospel ministry (3:1–3; cf. 1Co9:1,2), and, how Paul himself had been changed from a man of anger into a Christ-like man (6:6). God still works such life-changing miracles through his servants by giving us his Spirit (1Co12:9–11,28,29). In Paul’s case, these life-changing miracles done in and through him were clear evidence that he really was an apostle of Christ.

Look at verses 13–18. We notice several things here. First of all, Paul repeats the word “burden” three more times—specifically meaning the burden of asking for financial support. He stresses how he doesn’t want their possessions, and how he’s planning to spend himself and everything he had for them, like a true spiritual parent, out of deep love. He knows his enemies are saying he’s a crafty, tricky fellow, out to exploit others. But Paul reminds the Corinthians that none of the men he’d sent to them had ever exploited them, and neither did he. Paul and his coworkers can live that way not because they are so great, but because they are walking “by the same Spirit” (cf. Gal5:16).

Read verse 19. Though it seems Paul has been spending so much time defending himself, what he’s really doing is speaking in God’s sight as a man in Christ. He wrote in 2:17, “Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, as those sent from God.” As a man in Christ, Paul isn’t desperately trying to win their approval; he’s seeking to please God (1Th2:4). Then he adds, “…and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening” (19b). In Greek the word for “strengthening” literally means “building up to completion.” Paul repeats in this letter how he strives to use his God-given authority as Jesus’ servant to build them up (10:8; 13:10). It tells us how much Paul really wants this church to be built up (cf. 1Co14:12,26). He wants the Corinthians to stop being critical and suspicious of him so that they can grow as fully mature people in Christ (Eph4:13,15; Col1:28). It tells us that their view of Paul is actually an important part of their spiritual growth. It’s true of us as well. Being critical and suspicious of God’s servants can still stunt our spiritual growth. We should repent of it.

Look at verses 20,21. Paul writes this in the context of preparing to visit Corinth. He says back in verse 14 that this will be his third visit to them; he repeats it again in 13:1. He’s already said that his second visit to Corinth was “painful” (2:1). Now, as he prepares for this third visit, he confesses he’s afraid. Often when we’re going to visit people, we get nervous or afraid. We’re worried what we look like, or worried how people will react to us. But Paul is afraid of what he’s going to find among the Corinthians. Basically he’s afraid that all his labor to help them spiritually will seem wasted. As we’ve seen in both 1 and 2 Corinthians, this church had a real problem with divisions (1Co1:11; 3:3). They were fighting with each other, as well as fighting with Paul. They were boasting (1Co3:21; 5:6). Though they’re new Christians, they’re still worldly (1Co3:1,3). Here Paul is basically worried that they might still be living according to the flesh (Gal5:19,20; cf. Ro1:29,30). Paul wonders if this is why they’re especially susceptible to “slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder” against him. He worries that he’ll find “many” of them backsliding into their old sins of impurity, sexual sin and debauchery (21b). These were the sins for which their city of Corinth was famous. Some of them had in fact come out of such a lifestyle, so Paul had to write them to flee all such sins (1Co6:8–20). As countless people all around the world can attest, sexual sin is especially hard to get out of. People think that what they do sexually is their own business and that it doesn’t affect others. But it does. Sexual impurity is a sin against our own bodies, it’s a sin against others, and most of all, it’s a sin against God. But Paul’s concern here is that sexual sin is at the root of this church’s rebellion against him. Indirectly it tells us that when we repent of sexual sin, the Holy Spirit helps us totally change our hostile way of thinking, especially toward those in authority, and our minds become ruled by life and peace (Ro8:5–8).

Look at 13:1,2. This tells us an important aspect of Paul’s upcoming visit. He’s coming to deal with those whom he knows “sinned earlier” (cf. 12:21). He’s warning them that he’s coming to discipline them. He says they’re demanding proof that Christ is speaking through him (3a). Why? On the surface, they think he’s too weak, that his life of suffering is a sign that God is not pleased with him. But the real problem is that they don’t want to hear the truth he has to say. Read verses 3,4. These words again show us Paul’s gospel-centered way of thinking and living. He’s again going to Corinth in weakness, depending only on the power of the Risen Christ living in him, which is real spiritual power.

Look at verses 5–7. Paul challenges the Corinthians to test if they’re really living by faith in Christ, if Christ is really in them. Though we may be struggling sinners, this is the secret to have the power to get out of our sins—faith that Christ is in us. When we pass this spiritual test, then we can also see if God’s servants are in Christ or not. It helps us pass one more test: the test of not just claiming to believe but actually doing what is right. Paul and his coworkers, because they’re living in Christ practically, are only working for his truth (8).

Read verse 9. Paul is just the opposite of the Corinthians. He’s not constantly trying to be better than them; he’s glad when he’s weak and they’re strong. And he’s praying for them to be fully restored. It’s amazing. Surely Paul was hurt by their disloyalty, criticisms and suspicions. But he had such humility to keep trying to help them. He had such a great shepherd’s heart to help them be fully restored. He just wouldn’t give up. In verse 10 he explains that he writes such tough things so that when he comes he won’t have to be harsh in using his authority—he really wants to have a graceful time with them.

Read verse 11. Paul gives the Corinthians five exhortations here. But what stands out is how he repeats the words “full restoration.” In Greek it literally means to be fixed to be useful. Right now they’re a broken church. They just can’t function the way God wanted. Their sins and divisions and quarreling with him are making them useless. Paul just said he was praying for them to be fully restored (9b). Now he urges them to strive for full restoration themselves. It means they have to take ownership to make it happen.

Today, restoration is a popular topic. Some people want to restore colonial peoples around the world to a place of real equality and respect. Some in this country have been talking about paying financial reparations to African Americans for their being held in slavery for so many years and socially oppressed. It’s another kind of restoration. On a less controversial note, some people today especially like to restore old houses. It may sound like fun, but it’s a very hard task. There are so many risks involved. There can be problems with the foundation, problems with the roof, problems with the plumbing, problems with the electrical wiring, and all kinds of other problems, such as termites, water damage and mold remediation. Old house restoration is kind of a metaphor for spiritual restoration of people or churches. These are really nice words—rejoicing, encouraging, being of one mind, living in peace. But to really do these things doesn’t mean to gloss over all our very real problems or live in denial. There are so many risks and so many challenges to actually make full restoration among people happen. Full spiritual restoration of people and churches involves hard labor, patience, wisdom and paying many costs. But Paul says to strive for it. To strive for it requires faith. What kind of faith? Paul says in verse 11b, “And the God of love and peace will be with you.” Paul usually emphasizes God’s peace, but here alone, to the Corinthians, he says that he’s “the God of *love* and peace.” We know that this church especially needed to pursue God’s love (1Co13). In fact, we all need faith in God’s love to pursue full spiritual restoration.

Read verse 14. In his letters Paul often ends with a benediction. But this is the only one that’s about the Trinity. He emphasizes the grace of Jesus, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Because Paul has faith in this God, he has hope and confidence that the Corinthians can be fully restored. Restored in the grace of Jesus, restored in the love of God, restored in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Really, this describes being restored to God himself. We need faith in this God to experience full spiritual restoration in our own lives and in our fellowship. May God help us newly experience the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, especially through repentance. May God make us a fully restored Christian fellowship that is useful to him in our time, especially to bring young people back to him.