

2 Corinthians 13 – Fully Mature in Christ

6/12/20 AD – St Mark's Northbridge

BIG Idea: Paul prays and desires for the Corinthians to be fully mature in Christ

Pray.

Signs of Growth

Well last Sunday amidst the joy of all being back together at church, there was one comment which I heard repeated a few times. And it was:

“Wow, hasn't he grown so much!”, and, “She's definitely going to be taller than her mum!”

After time away and not seeing each other as often, being back together last week made us see how much people had changed and grown – especially amongst the younger members of St Mark's. That they aren't as little as they were 8 months ago.

And as Christmas approaches, I'm sure this is something we're all going to notice at family gatherings and with friends. That over time people change and grow.

It's an obvious thing to say, but we are all growing. Not just in age but in appearance. Some of us may have stopped growing vertically and now we're growing horizontally. Or our hair is no longer growing in length but is now being transformed into shades of grey – shades of wisdom and maturity. Or we're just losing it all together!

But of course as Christians, we are all growing in Christ. The Christian life is one of growth and maturity. It's not stagnant and static but we are on a trajectory of growth

and maturity as followers of Jesus – becoming more like Him and growing in our godliness as we head towards glory.

But is that something we are committed to? Is growing and becoming mature followers of Jesus high on our agenda? Do we think that it just happens naturally? Are there things which stop us from growing and maturing in our faith?

Because in the busyness and tiredness of life it's easy to do the same old thing over and over again. To just coast along and flat-line in our faith. Or worse still, to go backwards – to regress.

And if we're committed to growing, are we growing in the right way? Do we find it more satisfying to grow in our skills and competencies or our knowledge? Do we take greater delight in our successes at work or our legacy in life than our godliness?

I ask these questions because the Apostle Paul's ministry was focussed on seeing God's people grow and mature in Christ. We see this down in verse 10 of our passage. Paul says:

10 This is why I write these things when I am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of authority—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.

Paul's mission as an apostle is to build up God's people. To see them grow and mature in Christ. And that's why he's written this letter – that the Corinthians would be built up and grow as God's people.

And this theme of growth and maturity comes into sharper focus in this last chapter. As Paul finishes this letter, his aim is to see the Corinthians grow and mature in Christ.

1. A Warning (v1-4)

But this chapter begins in what appears to be a strange way for someone who is seeking to build up the Corinthians. Paul begins with a warning. A warning about his return to Corinth. He says there in verse 2:

2 I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others,

This is a warning that Paul has given before, and which he's giving again. When he comes, Paul will deal with those who have sinned previously. But this is not a blanket warning for everyone who has ever sinned in Corinth, otherwise he'd be dealing with everyone.

Rather this is a warning that Paul will deal with those in the church who are living in unrepentant sin.

And the end of chapter 12 shows us this. In your Bibles if you flick back to chapter 12 and verse 21, Paul is fearful of the prospect that he will arrive in Corinth to find those who have sinned and not repented. He especially notes there the sins of impurity, sexual sin and debauchery. And when you read Paul's first letter to the Corinthians these issues are on view in the church.¹ That there was sin running rampant and there were even some in the church who were quite proud and tolerated it.

And Paul doesn't want to be grieved by the sight of this unrepentant sin in the church when he arrives.

¹ 1 Cor. 5, 11.

So his warning is that if there is still unrepentant sin, then Paul will deal with those who have sinned and not repented. And he wants there to be witnesses of this, as he says in verse 1.² This is consistent with what Jesus taught about having multiple witnesses when dealing with sin in the church (Matt. 18:15-20).

Now I did say that this seems like a rather strange way of Paul seeking to build up the Corinthians – by warning them. But it isn't so strange when you consider that unrepentant sin compromises a Christian's capacity to grow and be mature in Christ. Paul doesn't want the Corinthians to go backwards and regress in their faith. The presence and tolerance of unrepentant sin is a barrier to being built up and growing in the faith. And that's why Paul gives this warning.

And as Paul gives this warning, he wants the Corinthians and us who read this to be in no doubt as to whose authority he is acting on. Paul gives this warning as Christ speaking through him. It's a reminder that Paul is Christ's apostle and so Christ speaks through him and he acts on behalf of Christ. And it's the powerful Christ who is speaking and acting through him to the Corinthians.

Which, as we've been going through 2 Corinthians, is a shift in emphasis. Because in this letter Paul has made much of his own weakness.³ But here he wants to emphasise

² In Deuteronomy, this quote from the law demanding multiple witnesses doesn't just occur in matters of testimony of civil matters and disputes between different people (Deut. 19:15) but also occurs in the context of testifying to someone engaging in idolatry (Deut. 17) – this would appear to be what is on view here in this chapter.

³ You see weakness and strength is one of those paradoxes of the Christian life and the gospel. That Christ Jesus was crucified in weakness and that the gospel is a message which looks weak. And as Christians we are weak – weak people who need God. And yet Christ Jesus was raised in power. The gospel is the power to save all who believe. And as those in Christ, Christians have Christ's power in them.

power – it's by Christ's power and authority that he is warning and dealing with the Corinthians.

As Paul says there in verse 4:

...Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him in our dealing with you.

So it's with Christ's power and authority that Paul is dealing with the Corinthians as he seeks to build them up with this warning.

2. A Test (v.5-6)

So what are the Corinthians to do? How are they to respond to this warning? Are they to be fearful of Paul's return visit? What are they to do?

Well Paul sets them a test. It's not an exam that they have to study for, but a check-up.

And while lots of tests and examinations are the cause of much stress, doubt and anxiety, this one is different. It's a test with the purpose of giving confirmation and assurance. It's a self-diagnostic with one very simple question. It's there in verse 5:

5 Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.

'Are you in the faith?' That's the question Paul asks the Corinthians.

When examining your life – your actions, your thoughts, your speech, your whole life – is it in accordance with the faith? And not any faith, but **the** faith – faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Does your life as a follower of Jesus match up with what you believe? SI your life consistent?

And in verse 5 Paul has great confidence that the Corinthians won't fail this test:

Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?

Paul is addressing them as believers and wants them to remember who they are and to live accordingly. That having examined themselves they will be found and confirmed to be in the faith:

And in verse 6 he is at pains to remind them that he has not failed this test. He is living and speaking as one who has Christ in him. There is integrity with Paul. And he is confident of that same integrity in the Corinthians.

Now before we move on, it's important that we give ourselves the same test. We must examine ourselves and see whether we are living in the faith.

It can be so easy to skip over this warning and this test which Paul sets for the Corinthians as being something just for them back then. After all, Paul is addressing a specific church with some specific unrepentant sin. And the situation in Corinth seems miles away from our church. Corinth was a wild place and as a church they seemed to be off-the-chain. Surely that's not us. Surely we would never end up like that?

But we would be naïve to think that this warning and test from Paul has no relevance for us. Because brothers and sisters, we live in the same world and we are just as susceptible to sin as the Corinthians. There is nothing stopping us from becoming a church that tolerates and doesn't deal with unrepentant sin.

So we must take heed of Paul's warning about unrepentant sin. And while the unrepentant sin in Corinth was quite overt and clear for all to see, what about us? When you look around St Mark's it thankfully doesn't strike you as being a church which flaunts and tolerates sin – unlike parts of the church in Corinth.

But what about the hidden sins? The sin in our lives in the moments when no one is watching. Like envying others and what they have, or the pride in yourself and your performance, or the greed for more and more stuff, or the ungratefulness towards God for all that He has given you, or even the malicious thoughts you harbour towards others. Are we tolerating sin in our lives and not repenting of it?

Well like the Corinthians, we must test ourselves. Examine ourselves and whether we are in the faith. Does my life match up with my faith? That's the question we need to keep asking ourselves.

Am I living in line with the reality that Christ lives in me?

You see the test here isn't to pull your socks up and do better. But it's to live according to your identity – who you are as a Christian who has been forgiven and who has Christ living in you. And it's not a test that should make us doubt our assurance. But lead us to continued repentance and faith as we keep running to Jesus and what He has done for us on the cross.

And we also examine ourselves knowing that Jesus will return. While the Corinthians were to examine themselves in light of Paul's return and the way he would deal with them, we examine ourselves knowing that Jesus will return in power as the judge.

And so as we press on towards that day we are committed to growing and maturing in Christ. Which means we repent of sin. If we are to be built up in the faith then this means examining ourselves so that we are living according to Christ.

This was Paul's great desire for the Corinthians. And he didn't just warn the Corinthians that he was coming and set a test for them, but he also told them of his prayer and desire for them.

3. A Prayer (v.7-10)

In verse 7 Paul says:

7 Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong

He earnestly desires and prays that the Corinthians will do the right thing.

And then he says in verse 9:

and our prayer is that you may be fully restored.

These two prayers are connected to each other. Paul's prayer for the Corinthians is that they would do the right thing, repent of their sin, and live in line with their faith in Jesus, and that they would be built up and grow in Christ.

That word ‘restored’ in verse 9 is getting at the idea of being “put in order” and being “in a condition to function well”. Other translations go with the sense of “being complete” or “mature”.

So Paul is praying for their growth and maturity as Christians. That the Corinthians live their best and most complete life. That they live with integrity as those who have Christ living in them (v.5).

And you see this prayer and desire of Paul is not self-centred or self-seeking. In verse 7 Paul wants the Corinthians to know that this prayer for them is not so that he looks good.

If you remember last week Pat showed us from chapter 12 that Paul’s ministry was one of love. He ministered to the Corinthians not for his own sake and glory but out of love for the Corinthians.

And that’s what we see in these prayers of Paul. He eagerly desires and prays for the Corinthians to grow and mature in Christ. That they would repent and examine themselves. And in verse 10, he reminds them that he writes this so that they would be built up.

And so is that our prayer and desire for ourselves? Is that our prayer and desire for one another at St Mark’s?

That we would do the right thing and be fully restored.

That we would grow in our godliness and maturity.

Like most of Paul's prayers, this prayer for the Corinthians moves us from the mundane to what matters most. And this chapter certainly gives us fuel for our prayers.

For one I think Paul's prayer in verse 7 is one that we could all start every day with:

"Dear Lord, I pray that today I will do the right thing". It's so short and simple, and yet so important that we pray for God's protection from sin – especially from hardness of heart that numbs us to sin that leads us to be unrepentant.

And his prayer in verse 10 for restoration or maturity should be our prayer as well. That we would be complete and live according to the faith.

And of course these prayers from Paul are also a source of immense joy. The joy that comes from seeing prayers answered. Jesus spoke of the joy in heaven when one sinner repents. And we share that joy too! That when we or a brother or sister repents of sin, it's a time to rejoice and thank the Lord.

And when we see the way God has been growing and maturing one of our fellow number, we rejoice at what God has done.

So Paul's great desire and prayer for the Corinthians is that they would do the right thing and be mature.

4. A Call to Maturity in Christ (v11-14)

And as Paul finishes this letter he wants the Corinthians to grow in the way they relate to one another. And from verse 11 he issues a series of commands which call for the Corinthians to be mature in Christ. He says:

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.

So Paul doesn't just pray for the maturity and growth of the Corinthians, but he commands it as well – that they “strive for full restoration”. That they become mature and complete as followers of Jesus.

And there are many things we could draw out here, but I want you notice the corporate nature of maturity and growth in Christ. That Christians who are growing and being built up, do so together. These commands are firstly addressed to “brothers and sisters”. That's who we are – our identity. And we are to rejoice together, encourage one another, live in peace with each other. And of course there's the holy kiss in verse 12 – or the holy elbow as we've been accustomed to over this season. There is fellowship as we strive for maturity in Christ.

You can see that growing in Christ and living the Christian life is not a solo project. It's a team game. We grow together as brothers and sisters.

But more importantly, Christian life and growth happens with God's presence and reliance on Him. And this is picked up in verse 14 as Paul finishes this letter by committing the Corinthians to the God who empowers and gives growth. To those who are familiar with the traditional Anglican Prayer Book Service, you'll see that verse 14 is the grace which we say to one another at the end of a service.

And you can see why we would say it to each other. As we commit one another to the Trinitarian God and His presence and work in our lives.

And you can see why Paul finishes this letter with the grace. He's reminding the Corinthians of the God who has worked and will continue to work in them – as he's outlined in this letter. That the Lord Jesus and his grace is first and foremost in bringing us into a relationship with God. Through Christ's love in dying for all, people become a new creation. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who though he was rich became poor so that we might become rich.

And the love of God seen in the very first chapter with Him being the God of comfort who comforts us in all our afflictions so that we can comfort others. The love of God seen in reconciling the world to himself through Christ.

And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. He who is the down payment and deposit of what is to come, and the Spirit who brings freedom through the new covenant.

It is this God who has saved us and will sustain and grow his people now and into the future to be mature in Christ.

14 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's Pray.