

## 2 Corinthians 13:11-14

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[ 0 : 0 0 ] This morning we were giving some thought to the benediction that ends Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 13 and verse 14 we read, May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. And these words of benediction conclude not only the letter, but also this final section where Paul is extending greetings and concluding exhortations to the brothers and sisters in Corinth. And he says a great deal in few words in the preceding verses in verses 11 to 13.

And within what he says there's one particular challenge or exhortation that stands out, and it's what we read in verse 12. Greet one another with a holy kiss. I'm going to think this evening about kissing. Now if that doesn't capture your attention, then I don't know what will. The verse speaks of this matter. The believers are encouraged, they're exhorted to greet one another in this way with a holy kiss. I'm going to think what that means. Is it the case that we are guilty of not obeying what the Bible so clearly commands us in these words? Are we in flagrant disobedience of God's Word for failing to greet one another in this manner? Is this just another example of Christians picking and choosing what they want to obey in the Bible? I'm sure you've heard that accusation leveled at us in different ways. Oh, you Christians, yes, you get all upset about certain things that the Bible says, and you get all judgmental about some things, but then there's other things that you just ignore.

Is that a justified accusation that is made? What principles can guide us in the matter of whether we must do exactly as the Bible directs in a given passage we have before us? This one example, but there are so many others. In this case, this exhortation to greet one another with a holy kiss.

If we are to argue that this verse does not require us to kiss one another at the end of this service, and let's face it, that's not going to happen. Regardless of what I say, I'm pretty sure that that's not going to happen. Well, if that's not going to happen, and if we consider that it's justified that it doesn't happen, on what basis do we come to that conclusion? I think there's a couple of ground rules that can be helpful for us to just note in this matter of biblical interpretation. This is really just to introduce us to what we want to say, but just a couple of things that I want to mention that I hope will be helpful in the context of this verse, but also I hope will be helpful in other circumstances where these principles could be applied. Just a couple of ground rules. One important ground rule is for us to distinguish between passages that are what we might call descriptive and passages that are prescriptive. Now, what do I mean by making that distinction? Well, maybe best illustrated with the use of an example. We're familiar with the passage in the book of Acts that tells us of how the believers at the very beginning of the New Testament church, how they're described as those who owned land or houses, they sold them, and they brought the proceeds to the apostles for distribution among those who were in need. That's what it says. Very clearly, this is what they did. Now, when we read that, do we then say, well, that's what the Bible says that Christians did, and so consequently, that is what we must do. Well, we don't come to that conclusion. We don't come to that conclusion not because we don't want to do it, though that may be true, but we don't come to that conclusion because we recognize that that passage is descriptive. It describes what happened. It says, this is what happened. Nobody is saying, this is what you must do. It's simply saying, this is what happened. Now, principles can be drawn from what motivated the believers to act in that way, and we can learn from them certainly, but in terms of the actual activity that they engaged in, a descriptive passage does not imply that that is something that we must do. That's a useful ground rule to bear in mind when you're reading the Bible and saying, well, how does that apply to me? Another ground rule to identify, and we've really already just touched on it, is to try and identify an underlying principle, or maybe several underlying principles that serve as the foundation for a given exhortation, be it in a descriptive or a prescriptive passage. Let me just illustrate that with another very brief example. Think of the instructions that Jesus gave to the disciples recorded in Matthew chapter 10 when He sent them out two by two to proclaim the message that the kingdom of heaven was near. They were given many instructions. One of them was that they were not to take any gold or silver or copper in their belts.

They weren't to do that. They weren't to take any money with them. Now, we read that. What do we conclude? Do we say, well, if I'm going to be involved in preaching the gospel, if I'm going to be involved in some kind of missionary endeavor, then I mustn't take any money when I go, because that's what Jesus told the disciples that they were to do. Well, again, we have to ask, well, what is this passage? What is the nature of this passage? Well, again, this passage, the passage I'm using as an example in Matthew 10, is also a descriptive passage. It describes what happened on that occasion with the disciples of Jesus. But even though it's a descriptive passage, we certainly can draw principles from the instructions given that do apply to us and that are helpful for us. If I just quickly think about what those might be in that example. I think what lies behind or partly what lies behind this instruction not to take gold or silver or copper, part of it is the importance that the disciples wouldn't delay going and doing what they had to do because of extensive preparation. And they say, okay, well, Jesus has told us to go and preach, but before we do that, we're going to have to save up money, we're going to have to collect money, we're going to have to make sure we have everything we need, and until we've got everything we need, well, we can't do anything. And Jesus says, no, don't be postponing your obedience on the basis, the seemingly very sensible basis of preparing well.

[ 7 : 18 ] But perhaps more significantly, the principle that underlies this is the need for believers engaged in Christian ministry, and that's all of us, to trust in God ultimately for all our needs, including our material needs. And the material consideration shouldn't determine our service, the nature of our service, and the extent of our service. So there are one or two principles, and with those principles in mind, let's return to our text there in 2 Corinthians. Greet one another with a holy kiss. What about this passage? Is it descriptive, or is it prescriptive? Is it something that we must do? That's actually quite difficult. It's in the context of personal greetings, which we might lead us to say, well, this isn't so much prescriptive. This isn't doctrine that is being taught. It is bound, I suppose, by the cultural considerations of the day in terms of how you would greet people and what have you. So we might be reluctant to describe it as prescriptive. But on the other hand, it is a clear instruction.

It's not simply saying that this is what some people do. It's actually telling the Corinthians, encouraging the Corinthians to do this. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

I think what we can draw from what we've already said in terms of one or two principles there is that if we do take it in some measure as prescriptive, which I think we can, I think if I had to veer in one direction or the other, I think we could view this as being something prescriptive, something that we as Christians have to also do. And having accepted that, we then apply the idea of, well, what's the underlying principle behind this practice that is being encouraged? What's the underlying principle that finds expression or that would find expression for the Corinthians in exchanging this holy kiss that we'll come on and say something about in a few moments?

That principle. Well, again, that's something we'll come back to. For the moment, suffice it to say that the kiss Paul speaks of represents something more important and deeper. We're not spiritualizing, we're not trying to ignore it, but we're simply recognizing that in and of itself, it represents something more important than the actual kiss itself. The kiss is the expression of a more fundamental reality. And with that in mind, with that recognized, let me explain what I want to do this evening as we proceed. I want us to think about the way the Bible speaks of the kiss as representing something much deeper, as representing themes and realities that are deeper than the act itself. And I want to look at the way this is so on three occasions. So, it's certainly not an exhaustive study of all that the Bible says about kisses. But three occasions, and two of them, as we'll see in a moment, and we've already read the passage that will guide us, are what we might call preconditions for the third, which is the text here in 2 Corinthians. Greet one another with a holy kiss. I hope that will become clear in due course. But let's think about a couple of occasions where we have this language of the kiss and it representing a principle or a reality that is much deeper than the act itself.

The three things that we're going to touch on this evening are this. First of all, kissed by the Father. Think a little bit about that. Kissed by the Father. But then also kissing the Son. What does that mean? What does that involve? And then the text here in Corinthians, kissing one another. First of all, kissed by the Father. Now, we've read that very familiar passage in Luke's gospel, in Luke chapter 15, the parable of the lost son. We didn't read the totality of the parable, but we read as far as we needed to for our purposes. And our particular interest is the tender and dramatic encounter between the lost son and the waiting father. We can just remind ourselves again of what happened in that encounter.

[ 11 : 45 ] In verse 20 of Luke 15, we read, So he got up and went to his father, the lost son, returning to his father. And then we read, The father kissed his son as the son very hesitantly returned to the father. What does that kiss represent?

This is a parable. It's not even claimed that this is an event that actually happened. But nonetheless, it speaks of this kiss that was exchanged. But what does the kiss represent? What does it tell us?

What can we draw from the fact that the father, on this occasion, kissed his son? I think there's two fundamental things that it speaks of and tells us of. First of all, it speaks of the status of the son.

Even though he was a lost son, even though he had gone with his inheritance and wasted it in wild living, he was still a son of his father. He remained part of the family. He didn't consider himself worthy to be part of the family, but he was part of the family. And so when he returns, and even when the father sees him from afar, it is the father's desire to rush and run towards him and to kiss him. And why? Because he was his son. The kiss represents, it speaks of the status of the son as a member of the family. But then, of course, the other side of that, the other side of the coin, is that it speaks also very clearly of the love of the father. The kiss represents the father's love, a love that is paternal, a love that is unconditional, regardless of all that the son had done. The father doesn't even know all that he had got up to, all the ways in which he had let him down, all the ways in which he had wasted the father's hard-earned wealth. He doesn't know about all of that, and yet he still loves him. It's a love that is forgiving. It's a love that is reconciling. The kiss represents a love that is tender. It represents a love that is demonstrative and visible. The father is not concerned by what others will say as they look on at this very gushing demonstration of his love for his son. So this kiss that we're told of in the parable, that the father ran to his son, threw his arms around him, and kissed him, speaks of, and represents, and declares the status of the son belonging to the family and the love of the father. Now we know, of course, that in this parable, the son represents foolish sinners like you and me, and that the father represents our heavenly father. He represents God himself. And with that in mind, it's good for us to even now together this evening ask the question, well, have we been kissed by the father? Have you been kissed by the father? All who by grace have been forgiven and welcomed into the family of God have been kissed by the father? To be kissed by the father speaks of our being welcomed into his family and being loved as his children.

So kissed by the father, one way in which the Bible uses this language, this picture in this case of the kiss of a father as representing something very wonderful and deeper. But then we also have another occasion, in this case, not a parable, but an actual occasion, a historical event, where we can consider it under this heading of kissing the son. The first reading that we had this evening was in Luke chapter 7. Luke chapter 7, where we have this account of Jesus anointing the woman who we're told had lived a sinful life. And in this account, and again, our concern isn't to think about all that we could draw from this, but to focus in, to home in on what it says concerning the kiss. In this case, a kiss given and a kiss denied. Because indeed, that is what we have. We have, I suppose, three main characters. We have Jesus himself, but then we have two further characters. And as we think about this matter of the kiss, they're interesting to contrast, because on the one hand, we have a character who grants Jesus a kiss, indeed who lavishes Jesus with kisses. And then we have another character who denies

[16:32] Jesus the kiss that he ought to have received. So let's think about these two characters and what these truths concerning the one kissing Jesus and the one denying him a kiss represent for us.

Think first of the woman, this woman who we're told had lived a sinful life. What did her kisses that she lavished on Jesus, what do they tell us about her? What do they represent? What do they communicate concerning this woman? Well, we don't need to speculate here, because Jesus himself identifies for us what her kisses represented. Let's just notice a few things that Jesus says.

First of all, they represented her great need of Jesus. In verse 37, we have her described as a woman who had lived a sinful life. And then in verse 47, as Jesus explains what has happened and rebukes, really, Simon, we read, therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven. This was a woman who had great need. She was in great need of Jesus. She was in great need of one who could forgive her sins. And the kisses that she lavishes on Jesus represent the great need that she had. But of course, and more fundamentally and more obviously and more clearly, they represent her great love for Jesus. And again, this is what Jesus himself tells us in verse 47, therefore I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven, for she loved much. She loved much. How did she demonstrate that love?

Well, one of the ways, and the way that we're told here, involved this lavishing of kisses on Jesus. Certainly, it's not all that we're told of. She wet his feet with her tears. She wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and poured perfume on them. These kisses that she lavished on Jesus represented or demonstrated the great love that she had for Jesus. But they also reflect or demonstrate her deep faith in Jesus. Again, we find that in Jesus' own explanation of the events. Right at the end, at the very end of the account, Jesus said to the woman, your faith has saved you. Jesus recognizes that she had deposited her faith in Him, that she had exercised this trust in Jesus as the one who could help her, as the one who could forgive her. There's also possibly the matter of her gratitude to Jesus.

Certainly, the explanation speaks very clearly of gratitude. When Jesus, as He compares her with Simon, he who has forgiven little, loves little. Then Jesus said to her, your sins are forgiven. And so, the implication is that this great love of the woman for Jesus was because she had been forgiven much.

[ 19 : 37 ] Now, there's a slight curiosity there, because if it's the case that this great love that she had for Jesus was out of gratitude for all that she had been forgiven, why is it that it's only in verse 48 that we actually have the words of Jesus to the woman declaring, your sins are forgiven?

What are we to understand? Are we to understand that it was only at that point that her sins were forgiven? Because if that's the case, it creates a difficulty. Jesus has just said that her great love is because of her gratitude at being forgiven so much. That's the principle He's outlined. I think really the way of understanding this is that in verse 48, the declaration of Jesus is really for the comfort of the woman and for the benefit of those looking on. In a sense, He's declaring what was already a reality. Her sins had already been forgiven, but now for the benefit of those who look on, shocked and horrified by what is going on, He declares publicly and audibly, your sins are forgiven.

So, these kisses lavished on Jesus, they represent so much in the life of this woman. And again, the challenge for us is to ask the question, well, what about me? Have I kissed the Son? Now, we can't clearly, literally kiss Jesus in the way this woman did, but we can demonstrate in other ways what this woman demonstrated by her kisses. Our need as we cry out for forgiveness, our love as we lavishly offer to Jesus and His bride, the church, the best of what we have. Our faith as we turn to Christ unashamedly and persistently in the midst of our multiple needs, and our gratitude as we seek to serve Him with thanksgiving. So, that's the kiss lavish. But the account, of course, also speaks of a kiss denied.

And this is why Simon is rebuked. In verse 45, Jesus says to Simon, you did not give me a kiss. You did not give me a kiss. What does this denial represent? Well, in a sense, we don't need to dwell much on it because it's simply the opposite of all that has been said concerning the woman.

And I leave you to work out what the opposite is. It's not complicated. But one thing I would say is this, or one thing I would add is this, that this reality of this man who denied a kiss to Jesus is a solemn reminder of how it's possible to be connected with Jesus, even in some way respectful towards Jesus. After all, this man had invited Jesus to his home for dinner. Very laudable act of hospitality. And yet, he was a man who denied Jesus the kiss that he ought to have been given.

[ 22 : 24 ] And that is something solemn for us to ponder on. It's possible for us to be in some way connected to Jesus, in some way respectful of Jesus, and yet hold back from that wholehearted personal commitment reflected by the kiss of this woman. It's also worth just noting, almost in the passing, one other purpose that was served in antiquity by the kiss, maybe in some measure even into modern times. But certainly in antiquity, there would be occasions when a kiss was a kiss of homage, a kiss that demonstrated respect as well as affection. And so, to kiss a ruler would be a great privilege, an act of subservient homage to the one that was being kissed. And that meaning, if you wish, of the kiss, that one possible meaning among others, reminds us really of the words that we've already sung in Psalm 2. Therefore, you kings, be wise, be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for His wrath can flate up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in Him. Kiss the Son.

Kiss Him in an act of homage, of reverence, of respect, recognizing who He is as the sovereign one over all over you. Yes, we kiss the Son as an act of love and affection, but we also kiss the Son as an act of homage and respect and honor. But then one final thing, as we land again in 2 Corinthians and the text there in chapter 13 and verse 12, greet one another with a holy kiss. What does this kiss represent? And let me just suggest a few things that the kiss that Paul here commends the believers in Corinth to exchange one with another, what it represents. And having established what it represents, we can all work out how we would obey this exhortation in the manner that is most appropriate.

It may not involve a kiss. It may involve a kiss. I'm certainly not denying that you could express these realities with a holy kiss. But however it's done is of secondary importance. The importance is to identify what it represents and to ensure that that finds expression in whatever way that it does.

So what does this kiss represent? Well, at the very simplest level, it is a kiss of greeting. Greet one another with a holy kiss. A greeting speaks of affection. It requires a gathering together.

You can't greet people without gathering together in order to do so. And that alone, that very simple reality reminds us of how Paul cannot conceive of Christians not gathering together. And when they do, they are to demonstrate their affection by greeting one another. The manner in which he suggests is with a holy kiss. But the important thing is that that affection that they have, that they share, be demonstrated one to another. It's a kiss of greeting at the simplest level. I think we can also think of it as a kiss of unity. There is to be no distinction with regard to who the believers are to kiss.

[ 26 : 01 ] Greet one another with a holy kiss. We've already commented this morning how Corinth was a very fractured congregation. There were many difficulties, many people who had fallen out with others, and there were all kinds of issues going on in Corinth. And yet, to all of them, Paul instructs them, greet one another with a holy kiss. This kiss was a kiss of unity. It would speak of unity.

That in the midst of all their differences and all of their troubles that they needed to resolve, they could demonstrate their unity in this way. I wonder how difficult that was for many of them to do what Paul was asking of them. What else does the kiss represent? What else can we say of it?

Well, using the very language that Paul uses, we can describe it as a holy kiss. What does that mean? What's a holy kiss? Well, I think it's a kiss that is being offered and received for a holy purpose.

The act itself presumably would have been no different to any other kiss of greeting. You wouldn't have seen anything different in the kiss that was being given or received. But it was a kiss offered for a holy purpose, to express their common connection to Christ, their shared membership in the family of God. They are, all of them as believers, those who have been set apart by God. And the kiss is a reminder of their special status as the set apart people of God. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

What else can we say? A couple of more things that let me suggest. The penultimate thing is, or way we can describe the kiss, is that it's a kiss of love. This language or this phrase of greeting one another with a holy kiss is language that we find repeated in the epistles. But there's one occasion, and it's Peter who is the writer on this other occasion, where a very similar expression is found, but slightly different in the vocabulary. In 1 Peter chapter 5 and verse 14, let's just quickly notice what Peter says there in very similar terms, but certainly not identical. And we can draw something from that. So, in 1 Peter chapter 5 and verse 14, there we read again in the context of closing greetings, Peter says, greet one another with a kiss of love. You can see it's so similar, the expression to the expression that Paul uses, but there is a slight difference. Not a holy kiss, but a kiss of love.

[ 28 : 35 ] It's almost, in fact, I wouldn't even say almost, it is a parallel expression. And I think it's highly unlikely that we should understand this as a distinct kiss. There wasn't all these categories. You know, you've got holy kisses, and you've got kisses of love, and who knows what other kind of kisses. No, this is the same kiss that would have been exchanged as believers greeted one another. But describing it in this way, as a kiss of love reminds us that this one kiss had both a holy character, but also represented the love that united the members of the fellowship. It's a kiss of love, a kiss that demonstrated and represented the love that they had one for another. And one final thing that I think we can say, that it was a kiss of witness. Now, while this is possibly stretching matters somewhat, the reason I say this is I'm reminded of the words of Jesus that He addressed to His disciples, recorded for us in John's gospel in chapter 13. By this, all men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another. Now, of course, when Jesus said that, and when He was speaking of them loving one another, He was thinking of that love being shown in a multiplicity of ways. He wasn't thinking particularly of it being expressed in this way. Nonetheless, as we've seen, this is a kiss of love. It was one way in which believers could demonstrate visibly to not only one another, but to others who would be looking on the love that they had one for another. And in that sense, it was a kiss of witness that Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, the most different and disparate group of people, and yet they would kiss one another.

And disregarding all the divisions that in society would have separated them. And so, people would look on and say, well, this is something radical. This is something so different. This gathering, this community is like something we've never seen or witnessed or experienced elsewhere. And so, I think we can think of it or describe it as a kiss of witness. So, a number of things that the kiss represented, and really the challenge for us, and we're not going to do that now, I leave that for you, but the challenge for us is that all of these things that the kiss represented are things that ought to be true of us. Now, how we will give expression to these things, well, that's for us to work out in the context of our own cultural setting, what would be or what would not be appropriate.

And we're all different. It's not even something that within one culture, it will be a homogeneous way in which we act. We're different even among ourselves. But regardless of how we give expression to these things, it is so important that we think seriously about whether we do give expression to these things. And indeed, if the underlying realities are realities, and that we are seeking to give expression to all of these matters, the affection one for another, the unity that we have, the fact that we are indeed a set-apart people, that we love one another, and that we would seek to demonstrate to others the fellowship and the unity that we enjoy, that that might in turn draw them to our Savior.

We may or may not kiss one another with a holy kiss. That's neither here nor there. But what we must do, as those kissed by the Father, as those who have been enabled to kiss the Son, is demonstrating in other ways all that the holy kiss represents, our affection, our unity, our common connection to Christ and shared membership of God's family, our love and our witness to the world, and those, as those who love one another. Greet one another with a holy kiss. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for all that we can learn as we turn to your word. We thank you that it is indeed all useful for instruction and correction, for helping us live useful and godly and obedient lives.

We pray that we would consider this exhortation that was given to the believers in Corinth, and that comes to us also this evening that we would examine ourselves and the fellowship that we belong to, to consider if the realities that that kiss that Paul spoke of gave expression to are realities for ourselves. We do thank you that we are indeed those who have been kissed by the Father, that we are those who have been welcomed lovingly and tenderly into the family of God. We thank you that we have been enabled to do that which would not have come naturally to us, to kiss the Son, to pay homage to Jesus, to show the love and the affection that we have as those who have been forgiven much. And we pray that in the light of that, we would indeed be those who gladly and joyfully kiss one another. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Let's sing now Psalm 133 in the Scottish Psalter. You'll find that on page 424.

[ 34 : 05 ] Psalm 133, we'll sing the whole of the psalm. We'll sing to the tune, Eastgate, behold how good a thing it is, and how becoming well together such as brethren are in unity to dwell. Let's stand to sing this psalm.

In unity to dwell.

In unity to the psalm.

In unity to the psalm. In unity to the psalm.

Amen. Life that shall never end May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.