
The Trinitarian Benediction

2 Corinthians 13:11-14

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Introduction

Tonight we continue our series on *Prayers of the Apostles*. In studying these prayers it is our objective to: 1) Explain how the NT Saints prayed as it is recorded in Scripture; 2) encourage a careful examination of our own praying; 3) exhort Christians to real, Biblical praying; and 4) expect personal transformation in our praying.

Our study this evening will be focused on 2 Corinthians 13:11-14. Let's begin with verse 5 of chapter 13 and read together through the end of the chapter [READ PASSAGE].

As a child growing up in the home of my parents I was always frustrated and sometimes openly annoyed, as were my siblings, at my father's persistent propensity to lead the family in prayer whenever something even slightly out of the ordinary was about to happen. This most regularly occurred at special family gatherings, such as holidays, family meals, or reunions; but it especially occurred when we were getting ready to send some member of the family off to somewhere. It probably occurred before my oldest sister was married-off as a 'not-yet 20' bride. I am certain it occurred as we sent my oldest brother off to southern California as a late adolescent eager to sew his wild oats and be 'out of the house.' It most certainly happened again when he later decided to divorce his wife of 10 years. I am certain it happened as we sent off my next oldest brother to the Army. And I am certain it happened as we sent off my next oldest, and oft rebellious, brother to the Marines. I know it happened every time I headed back to college in the fall or left the country for work abroad. It happened when we sent my younger sister and her husband out to make an appeal to my brother who had left his wife. It happened at the welcoming through birth of my younger sister's child who is severely disabled with cerebral palsy. It happened when we sent the next sister off to Florida with her husband. And it will happen again, Lord willing, when we gather in celebration of the birth of my youngest sister's first child in coming months. This is not to mention countless birthdays, Christmases, thanksgivings, family meals, and trials and tribulations that brought the family together to suffer in unity and proximity.

You have to see the scene with me. There is my dad, who is gentle, kind, and often diminutive, attempting to gather his wife, eight children (and depending on the stage of life, their spouses, and their children), and preside in a relatively short moment of quietness, calm, and then, prayer. We would all join hands and Dad would begin. Generally he would thank God for our family, pray about the occasion that brought us together, whether it be celebratory or sorrowful, pray for those who were not able to be with us at that time, and then close asking God to protect and deliver us. As *foolish* children do, we would often count how many times he said "Lord" in the course of one prayer as he tended to use this title of God to open the

prayer, close the prayer, mark any transition in the prayer, and fill any moment of forethought as he determined what to pray next.

As children and teens we squirmed, rolled our eyes, sighed aloud, and made clear by our body language that we were engaging in this activity because the consequences of resisting were sufficient to deter any mutinous activity. We did not value this God-honoring practice which my Dad clearly prized far above his children's personal preferences, however clear we made them. We, the oft-unwilling children-participants, feigned sincerity somehow oblivious about what we said to God in our hearts with this attitude. What was our problem? In part, it was that we did not understand this particular form and function of prayer. That was secondary to a lack of teaching. In the balance, however, were the attitudes of our hearts – we simply did not care.

But what was my Dad trying to accomplish? Was he trying to “teach his children a lesson” about respect by forcing them to remain quiet while he prayed? Was he laying the groundwork for what would be a longstanding family tradition - doing what his Dad had always done? Maybe he was anxious and praying just seemed like the right thing to do regardless of his belief about its actual value. Perhaps he was trying to set an example for his children without any real intent of communicating with God. Or, was this my dad doing his best to pronounce a benediction in the midst of those the Lord had placed into his care? Was he seeking to invoke God's blessing in the lives of those he cared for, loved, and nourished?

The benediction. Most of us have heard that word before. Most of us are probably familiar with *when* it occurs. Many of us may even relish and delight in the pronouncement of the benediction. Undoubtedly, some of us are as I was as a child. We roll our eyes, look down at our watches, and wonder why we are praying again when we just finished 3 minutes reading responsively, 30 minutes of singing, a 40+ minute sermon, sang yet another song, and it is already 12:10...the afternoon is wasting away...

The benediction is a form of *prayer* that is utilized throughout all of Scriptures. Tonight we want to come to understand the benediction and its benefit for us as believers. We will do this by first taking a significant portion of our time to consider the meaning and use of the benediction in both in the church and in Scripture. Then, we will consider 2 Corinthians 13:14 as a specific, and somewhat unique, example of a New Testament benediction.

Before we begin, let us pray and ask the Lord for His help and guidance as we study His Word. [PRAY]

A Benediction Primer

If we are going to study a New Testament benediction we will want to take some time to familiarize ourselves with this idea of a benediction. Most of us probably recognize that what we often think of as a benediction, at least formally, is that short prayer that is given at the end of a Sunday worship service. The pastor may raise his hands and close his eyes and speak a few words of Scripture. Others may simply stand before the congregation without engaging too much in what is considered the ritual of prayer and pronounce some words that we may or may not recognize as being chapter and verse. Some believe the one pronouncing the benediction actually has power to bless while others see it as simply a prayer.

However done, the “benediction” is often used to bring things to a close. So is that all a benediction is? A handy tradition developed over years to neatly put the finishing touches on a worship service? Or, is this view the result of inattention to and lack of explanation about this important form of prayer used throughout the New and Old Testaments?

What is a benediction?

Let’s begin answering this question with addressing what may be one of the most frequent misconceptions about the benediction.

Is the benediction a prayer?

It may strike some of you as odd that we would consider the benediction in a series on prayer – after all, isn’t the benediction simply a few words uttered by the pastor at the end of the worship service? The answer to that question is NO, the benediction is not simply a few traditional words spoken into the air to bring everyone to attention and let them know that it is almost time to leave. The benediction is a declarative¹ prayer *to* God, for it is only God who can *effectively* respond to the content of the benediction. God is the intended audience of the benediction – not us! Certainly we are the benefactors – but it is important that we understand that the benediction, offered as a prayer, is not just idle chatter among ourselves. It is wholly God-centered and is, therefore, as any other prayer or speech, directed to God. [consider illustrating].

For some of you, that may not be surprising (while for others it may be), but it does cause you to say, “Oh, that’s right, I guess I haven’t thought about it that way in awhile...and I certainly have not regarded it that way lately.” We have become too horizontal in our understanding of public worship. How is this so (and if you will allow me to digress for a moment)?

As believers, particularly those of us who have ‘grown up’ in the church, we are prone or vulnerable to the comfort of “knowing a little bit.” We get comfortable, we understand the basics, we want to ease in and coast out without being pressed by others or pressing ourselves to continue to grow in knowledge and understanding. We say to ourselves, “so I don’t really understand why we do this or that, or why he said this or that...but, alas, if it is important they will tell me.” Like the Israelites described by Hosea, we are well-fed here at Clearcreek and one of the dangers is that we forget God somewhere in the midst of His blessing (Hosea 13:6).

It is in this state of mind, affect, and volition that we sit back, sigh, and let our minds relax. We come to regard things like the benediction as simply a number of “special” or flowery words spoken as a matter of tradition or habit. Because we have stopped listening closely, thinking carefully, learning faithfully, we begin to regard the ac-

¹ “declarative” was added after the preaching of this sermon on 19 June 2005. This helps to clarify the nature of many of the NT benedictions which are spoken as declaratives, but nonetheless require the blessing of God on His people by stating that which only God can do – thus requiring action on His part, namely, the fulfilling of His promises. Thus a declarative prayer, such as a benediction, may be thought of as a declaration aimed at God because it requires Him to fulfill His promises in order that the declaration be true.

tivities of the church as simply ritual. And that is the great danger in ritual – actions are stripped of meaning. And so the benediction becomes, “just what we do.” The act of communion is, well, ho-hum...I’m not sure if I’ll attend or not. And baptism is, at best, getting the chance to hear someone tell their story, and at worst something that leaves me as dull and bored as when I came in the door. While there are many explanations for why we arrive at these different points, one of them is lack of understanding and an underlying lack of desire to gain understanding. If you have failed to rightly understand the benediction or grown lax in your regard for it in this small way, consider in what other areas of the church’s activity you may have become lax or lazy or may yet still not fully understand the meaning or purpose of some activity.

What does the word benediction mean?

So the word itself – what can we come to understand about its actual definition? You may have already noted that this word is actually formed from two words put together. We have first, the word, bene. For those of you familiar with the romance languages, such as Italian or Spanish, you’ll quickly recognize that this portion of the word sounds a lot like what is often generically translated as “well” or “good.” Consider similar words such as benefactor, benefit, or benevolent. Then we have “diction” (or dic(h)ere) which can be most simply understood as, “to say.” So there we have at least the most basic meaning of benediction – “good word, good saying.” More formally, we can define a benediction as a pronouncement of blessing. We can read together what would be considered the most common OT and NT benedictions to give us a sense of the content of a benediction [READ: Deuteronomy 6:22-27; Ephesians 3:20-21]

What is the purpose of a benediction and how does it work?

The purpose of the benediction is simply to bless those over whom it is pronounced. This intention is made readily clear when those passages that are considered benedictions are reviewed. We have already considered two such passages, Deuteronomy 6:22-27; Ephesians 3:20-21, let’s look at two more: Philippians 4:8-9 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24. Generally, a benediction will use some appropriate portion of Scripture to pronounce blessing on its hearers by reminding them of the benefits and promises they have in Christ. It may also briefly remind the hearers of some instruction encouraging righteous living.

So how does the benediction actually work? While this may seem like a rather simplistic question – it is really an important question to ask as there are at least 3 diverse views on this topic and it is important that as believers we are thinking Scripturally about all things. At one end of the spectrum we have the first view, which is held by many Catholic churches. In this view the priest, exercising his sacerdotal (or priestly) power, actually confers the blessing through the utterance of the blessing. The priest is able to do this because of the “power” bestowed upon him when he is set aside to the priesthood. In this view, the thing blessed by the priest is made sacred. As such, the benediction can be conferred on things and not just people, such as crosses, churches, holy vestibules, etc.

At the other end of the spectrum we see the benediction being understood as being *merely* a prayer through which God *may* confer certain blessings on His people.

A third view states that the benediction, “is the declaration of the special privileges and relations in which those stand who have entered into covenant fellowship with Christ [believers]; that the blessings now declared are theirs by fight [merit] of that relation [redeemed by Christ’s work], and are conferred upon them by the Holy Spirit” (ISBE, 2005).

This third view is the correct view. The first view errs in that it places a man (or a woman), someone other than Christ, between God and man. Christ has earned all the blessings of God for us and no man is needed to bestow them upon us. In Christ all God’s requirements are met – Christ is our priest and mediator (Hebrews 8, 9). His cross-work is wholly sufficient. The second view errs in that it reduces the benediction to simply a prayer of intercession. While intercession is certainly one of the functions of prayer, it cannot assume the certainty about God’s will and plan that is common to the benediction. The third view is right in that it does not imply a man in a special office is needed to apply that which has already been won by Christ as does the first view; nor does it, as does the second view, make the benediction simply a desire expressed to God. The benediction is a statement of God’s blessing on His people as it is secured by Christ. In doing this, we are reminded of a past act which has defined our present reality and made certain our future hope.

Who may pronounce the benediction?

When correctly understood, a benediction, or a blessing, can be offered by any believer to another believer. It is not an “ability” or “power” given only to those who hold an office in the church. It is the office that Christ holds, not any man, which allows any benediction pronounced to be fulfilled. All believers have free and equal access to Christ. Scripture provides a good and useful guide when determining what to say in the benediction. I recommend familiarizing yourself with several of those used in Scripture.

Why and when should benedictions be given?

A benediction is first and foremost given to bless the believer. This blessing may be used to encourage, embolden, remind, instruct, and compel the believer in the grace they have received because of Christ’s work on their behalf. A benediction should never be given glibly as an informal expression of good bye or good luck – therefore restraint and wisdom should be employed so as to guard the meaning of the benediction lest it become empty ritual, no more meaningful than a simple “see you later.” This can easily happen when brothers or sisters in Christ begin using phrases such as “Go with God” or “God be with you” or “God bless you” as mere expressions used to indicate the mutual recognition of parting or ending a particular function.

In Scripture you see benedictions pronounced in the following types of occasions: Public worship and celebrations of the Lord’s work in redeeming His people (Leviticus 9:22; Numbers 6:23; 2 Chronicles 30:27), at the beginning of great works for the Lord or momentous occasions in which the Lord is pleased (I Kings 5:8; Genesis 24:60 [betrothal of Rebekah to Isaac], Ruth 4:11-12), in the answering of prayer (I Samuel 1:17-18; 2:20),

at parting (Luke 24:50, Deuteronomy 33), at the end of a sincere and serious communication or a period of instruction (throughout epistles).

Although I do not believe we are limited by Scripture to the pronouncement of benedictions on only such occasions, these uses should serve to guide our judicious use of benedictions.

The Trinitarian Benediction

So we have taken some time to consider the benediction itself and we'll conclude this evening by briefly considering the particulars of the benediction that is given in 2 Corinthians 13:14. The benediction pronounced at the end of 2 Corinthians is somewhat unique in that it mentions all three members of the Godhead in conjunction with a particular benefit they give to the believer. This quality has earned verse 14 the distinction of being known as the Trinitarian Benediction. We want to finish our time together by looking at this benediction as an application of what has already been said this evening.

Corinthian context

We want to begin by understanding some of what the immediate context for this benediction is. Paul is writing to a troubled people to whom he has spoken firmly and correctively. It is into this difficult conversation that Paul deploys the Trinitarian benediction. To the now distressed and hurting he speaks the good word of blessing. It should be clear that Paul is not speaking glibly as if to say, "Well, to wrap things up here, let me say that everything 'will turn out okay;' you guys are great, and please don't be upset by what I said – it probably sounded more harsh than what I meant to be." No, quite the opposite. Paul is summarizing and again emphasizing his instructions to the Corinthians. He says in v. 11, "Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace." Paul is calling for obedience from a disobedient church right up until his pen runs out of ink.

As Paul concludes, he connects his commands to the Corinthians with a promise in the form of an "if-then" statement. The "then" part of the equation is the final phrase of v. 11, "And the God of love and peace will be with you." In essence, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the formula first announced in the OT to the people of God: If you obey, there will be blessings; if you disobey, there will be cursings. If - you, Corinthians, will repent, believe, and obey, your heavenly Father – then, He will bless you with Himself and the communicable qualities of His nature – His love and peace will be with you. This is a basic principle that is repeated throughout all of Scriptures. [OT promise – I will be your God and you will be my people] [James 4:8 – Draw near to God and He will draw near to you]. When God's people obey God from the heart, He blesses them with His fellowship and therefore an enjoyment of all the qualities of His holiness.

In mentioning this point, we should keep in mind that in an ultimate sense, an 'already not yet' reality exists: Christ has perfectly obeyed for us and by doing so has won all of God's favor. So we rejoice that all the blessings of God are ours in Him.

Confessional clarity

In the context of the rest of Scriptures we are able to say that Paul is identifying nothing less here than the eternal three-in-one, the Trinitarian Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (John 1:1-2; Matthew 28:19; 1 Peter 1:2). As believers it is important to remember that each member of the Godhead plays a unique and necessary role in the life of the believer. One member of the trinity should never be deemphasized while others are over-emphasized. Rather their roles and functions should be spoken of to the extent and in the manner that Scripture speaks of them. Because the Scriptures regularly speak of each of the members of the Trinity we must also. Here, after writing a difficult letter to the Corinthian church, calling them to get serious about living righteously, Paul identifies each member of the Trinity as those who will enable their movement toward righteousness. Our predestination, justification, faithful response to His call, sanctification, and glorification, in short our entire redemption, is wholly dependent on the interdependence and perfect co-working of the Trinity. In pronouncing the benediction Paul clearly identifies the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as those who are co-equal and co-ministers, although serving different functions and playing different roles in the God-head. It is in prayer that Paul encourages the Corinthians to remember and live consistently with the benefits they receive from the Trinitarian Godhead.

Compelling content

Although not exhaustive, Paul identifies several characteristics of the Trinity as they pertain to the encouragement and edification of the Corinthians. If we had time, it would be a good exercise to carefully consider how the content of this benediction flows from the letter in its entirety. We do not. But we will work to learn what we can from this benediction about prayer and its utilization in our own lives.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ

Consider first our Lord Jesus Christ. He is Lord because of His divine nature. He is Jesus, reminding us of His human nature. And He is Christ, reminding us of His office – He is the Messiah, the long-promised redeemer. Then there is the *grace* of the Lord Jesus Christ. Consider for the believer what encouragement can be gained from considering the grace given us through Christ. This is not only grace acting in salvation as we are regarded with favor by God because of Christ's work on the cross, but is the grace, or the enabling power, that allows us to move Godward in our day to day sanctification.

Consider that in verse 11 Paul tells the Corinthians to aim for restoration (perfection). He tells them in verse 9 that he is praying for their restoration (perfection). In verse 5 he tells them to test themselves to see if they are in the faith and Christ be in them – What a tall order! How can Paul “pour it on” this way? He can require these things of the Corinthians because the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ will be with them. And as a wise shepherd does, Paul closely follows his demands with the means for accomplishing them. Paul prays that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with them.

The love of God

There is some sense in which Paul's ordering of this benediction is reasoned. Although God's love is directly involved in Christ being killed on a cross for our redemption (Romans 5:8), there is also a sense in which we cannot think of ourselves as anything but objects of God's wrath until the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is visited upon us. It is in this grace, this free merit, won for us by Christ's death on the cross – His propitiary sacrifice, that we are able to be transferred from the realm of God's wrath to the special place of His love (Romans 3:21-26; 5:1-9; Ephesians 3:12; 2:6-7). We are no longer objects of His wrath, but objects of His loving kindness. We see evidence of the love of God in His pardon, sanctification, and salvation conditional on the work of Christ. Paul through prayer reminds the Corinthians that the love of God can be with them, upon them, because the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ has made it possible. In this benedictory statement the Corinthians are encouraged that the one sovereign and eternal Creator, has freely chosen to call them His own – because of His loving-kindness, won by Christ, He will be their God and they will be His people. In the midst of Paul's stern admonishment, the Corinthians should gain great comfort from the reality of God's love upon them.

The fellowship of the Holy Spirit

It is the death of Christ that redeems us from the curse of the Law, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit (Galatians 3:13, 14). This promise is secured to all the people of God which makes each a joint partaker of the Holy Spirit. In this way we become not only those who have fellowship with the Spirit himself, but also have fellowship with other believers because of the Holy Spirit's enabling of unity in the body (Ephesians 4:1-6). This, therefore, becomes the grounds for the declaration of one body and one communion of saints that we as believers enjoy (1 Corinthians 12). The Corinthians can and must live together in unity because they are unified by the Spirit – this is one of the defining marks of the church (Ephesians 4, John 17, John 13). Corinthians test yourselves! See if the faith be in you and you in Christ...you are unified as a body of believers because you have the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Again, Paul utilizes this benediction to not only remind, encourage, and give hope to the Corinthians, but in an indirect way he admonishes them toward godly unity, as has already been done in the preceding verses (v. 9ff), and indicates how it can be so.

Be with you all

Finally, Paul shares his desire in regards to these three pearls of reality which make up so much of the substance of the believers life – may they be with you all. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you, may the love of God be with you, may the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you. Does he pray these things because He wonders about the commitment of the Trinity to these realities? No. He prays these things because he wonders about the Corinthians understanding and commitment to these realities of the believer's life. He asks that the whole Godhead, in grace, love, and fellowship, be made real in the Corinthian's lives. And this is much the role of prayer when it functions as benediction. We repeat to our hearers the wonders, magnificence, and glory of God's redemptive plan that they might be urged on toward

living out these realities in their own lives. It is a form of encouragement, reminding, admonishing, and primarily, blessing. We are blessed in the realities of our redemption. May the grace, love, and fellowship of the Godhead be with us all.

So what can be learned about prayer, when employed in a benedictory mode, from the message shared tonight?

Applications and Observations

1. The benediction is an appropriate form of prayer that can be used to bless God's people. Generally it is reserved for public worship and the marking of momentous occasions among believers. As such...
 - a. Keep in mind that these "occasions" for which the benediction is appropriate are not always "happy" times. They may be filled with sorrow, distress, and difficulty. Certainly the benediction concluding 2 Corinthians was not on the tail of a joy-filled communiqué from Paul. Where the blessing of God upon his people is appropriate, a benediction is appropriate.
 - b. Commit several benedictory Scriptures to memory that you might use them at appropriate times (e.g. I Corinthians 13:14, **Numbers 6:**)
 - c. While "I love you," "Good-bye," and "Best wishes" are often appropriate, consider how much more appropriate and powerful a reminder of God's goodnesses to the believer can be. Fathers, I especially encourage you in this manner...
 - d. Do not allow the benediction, whether in its pronouncement or its hearing, to be come glib or insincere.
 - e. Remember that the benediction is a declarative prayer, and is therefore directed to God but is for the good of the hearer. Keeping in mind the Trinitarian Godhead, this three-in-one that all the promises and realities of our redemption are realized.
2. Christ is the enabler of the good word, the benediction. In a very basic sense, the great encouragement, the great beauty and help of the benediction, is that it simply reminds us of the adequate abundance of the blessings that are ours because of Christ. This is not mere intercession, nor is it a "special" deployment of grace given through an elder, it is the freely given reminder of a reality that is already in force.
3. When the benediction is pronounced during public worship, be sure that you are alert and eager to hear its speaking. Consider carefully, meditate, dwell upon, and drink deeply of the truths proclaimed there within.

Over one another, pray this benediction with words like this:

Father, I praise You that You have revealed Yourself as a Trinity. Therefore, may you be with _____ so that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, Your Fatherly love and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit will be their experience. (2 Corinthians 13:11-14)

