

“The Holy Kiss”
2 Corinthians 13:11-14
April 14, 2024

INTRODUCTION:

We come today to our final sermon on the “one another” passages of the New Testament, and our topic today is one that may be a little surprising to some. “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” It’s likely that very few of you have ever heard a sermon on this verse, but that will soon be corrected. In contrast to our relative inattention given to this, the New Testament repeats this command five times. The action being commanded here is a physical and bodily expression of love for one another that is to be engaged in when the church gathers. Though we only have two sacraments in the church, and this is not one of them (the two being baptism and the Lord’s Supper), there is a sacramental quality to this holy kiss. The theological definition of a sacrament is that it is a sign and seal of God’s covenant promises to us. A sign is simply an outward and bodily expression of an important biblical truth, while a seal is something of an intensifier. A sacrament signifies something, and it reinforces and conveys the thing symbolized. The holy kiss signifies our love for one another and it is also intended to strengthen our love for one another. The outward expression is important. The command is not simply to have warm feelings of affection toward other believers, but to express that affection in an outward, bodily act.

Before we get into the details of this command, let me make two clarifications. First, this kiss is in no way sexual, which is one of the reasons it is called a “holy” kiss. It is an expression of warmth and intimacy between relatives or close friends. Second, it is a culturally defined expression. Different cultures have different ways to express this kind of intimacy. In the south, we typically express it with a warm handshake and a smile, or with a warm embrace. There are many cultures around the world that still express this warmth with a kiss, and many subcultures even in America. One side of Wendy’s family includes an Italian uncle and a German aunt. When Wendy took me to their house in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania to meet them for the first time, Wendy’s aunt greeted me by reaching up and grabbing my cheeks with both of her hands and planting a kiss right on my lips. That was a bit of a shock for this southern boy. My point, though, is that the precise gesture accompanying the greeting is a cultural issue. This verse, therefore, doesn’t mean that every church ought to schedule a time in their worship service for the holy kiss. But I do believe that there should be some expression of warm greeting in our gatherings. That’s what we do in the “Welcome of God” portion of our liturgy, even if it makes the introverted among us a little uncomfortable. As we explore this command in greater detail, I want to point out three features of this holy kiss.

I. Love

At its most basic, this kiss is a gesture of love. In the New Testament world, kisses were signs of affection for family members and for those of the same social class. They were also a way to show honor to those in positions of authority. You may remember that Jesus rebuked Simon the Pharisee for not extending this basic courtesy of the kiss to Jesus, a courtesy owed Jesus because of his identity as a rabbi. All three of these apply to church relationships. We offer this gesture of greeting because we are of the same family of God. And we also extend it to everyone in the church regardless of social class, signifying our conviction that social class no longer defines us because we are all equal in Christ. And we also show honor to one another by extending a warm greeting to all. It is as if we are saying, “I see you, I recognize you, and I value you.”

Why does Paul refer to it as a *holy* kiss? I’ve already mentioned one reason, and that is to make it clear that there should be no selfish and lustful motive. There are other features of holiness that are to be present with this kiss. The word suggests the importance of sincerity, or the lack of hypocrisy and manipulation. There are Old Testament examples of this darker side of a kiss. Jacob kissed his father, Isaac, while stealing the birthright from his brother, Esau (Gen. 27:26). David’s son, Absalom, attempted a coup against his father by kissing the Israelites as they came to Jerusalem for help. It becomes evident that he was only using those he kissed, pretending to care for them only to turn the hearts of the people against King David.

The extreme version of an unholy kiss, betrayal, also shows the power of the kiss. The pain of betrayal requires the presence of a level of intimacy in a relationship. It’s your closest friends, not your enemies, who have the greatest capacity to inflict the pain of betrayal upon you. That makes the gesture of the kiss ideally suited for a betrayal. The general of King David’s army, Joab, once settled an old score with another general, Amasa, with the betrayal of a kiss. He greeted him warmly, brought him close to kiss him, and then killed him with his sword. The most well-known of the kiss for a betrayal was the betrayal of Jesus by the kiss from Judas.

The application of this is to make sure that when we do our form of greeting with the welcome of God each week, that we do so with the holiness of sincere love. The weekly greeting should remind us to make sure that there is no unforgiveness in our hearts toward a brother or sister in Christ. Note that the command of verse 12 does not stand alone, but follows a series of commands in verse 11. These commands are necessary if our kiss of others is to be holy. It begins with the command to rejoice. This isn’t the false “put your happy face

on” effort, but the deep joy of walking with Christ in the assurance of his love and forgiveness. Then he says “aim for restoration,” which acknowledges that there are times when relational challenges occur. In such times, we are not to withdraw but to engage with others in an attempt to restore the relationship. We are to comfort one another. Next, we are to agree with one another. Is Paul serious? How could we possibly agree with one another about the myriad issues we encounter in life? Surely he doesn’t mean that we should all vote the same, choose the same schooling options for our children, root for the same sports teams. Philip Hughes is helpful in his explanation of this. Paul “does not mean that individual judgment and opinion should be set aside, but that as fellow-Christians, with all their diversities of ability and temperament, they should be united in what is essential, namely, in the love and doctrine of Christ.” The promise given is that when we live in such peace with one another, **“the God of love and peace will be with”** us.

II. Touch

To state the obvious, the greeting of others with a holy kiss or its cultural alternative requires physical touch. We are made to relate to God and others through physical bodies. Christianity has frequently erred in its grasp of this by embracing a form of Gnosticism. If you’ve studied any philosophy, you are aware of the fact that Plato taught that only the spiritual is ultimate. The material is temporary and unimportant. Gnosticism is the error that resulted from the attempt to blend Plato’s thought with Christianity. It is an error that is still with us today, an error that elevates the spiritual at the expense of the material. But God has created us as physical, material beings. Furthermore, the second member of the trinity, the Son of God, has taken on human flesh, a body he will have for eternity and a body that is the pattern for our future bodies of immortality.

The result of this is that you and I need to be touched, both spiritually and physically. This is not about sexuality, but about our need to be loved in a way that is not divorced from our physical bodies. We can see this from the very beginning of human life. When a child is born, the baby has an essential need to be touched and cuddled by its mother. I understand that newborns have an ability to focus on a depth of field that extends to only twelve inches. That happens to be the distance from the baby’s eyes to the face of the mother while the baby is nursing. Every human ever born begins life with a critical need to be loved in a way that includes physical touch. Psychologists have found that where such a connection is lacking, permanent damage is done. They’ve given a name to it called “attachment disorder.”

As we begin life with this need, even so we continue to need love. As adults, it is normally conveyed to us through communication and touch. That’s where

this greeting of one another with a kiss comes in. It is verbal in that it is a greeting, but also a greeting that includes touch.

Jesus certainly understood this. As he came in love, he touched people. He once met a Samaritan woman who was drawing water at a well, and he asked her for a drink. She was shocked to receive such a request. Jews and Samaritans didn't normally interact with one another like this, especially if it was a Jewish man and a Samaritan woman. The act of receiving a drink from her would have inevitably included touch. His lips would have touched a cup that had been touched by her hand. Though the touch was more indirect than direct, it was a shocking thing to have happened in this culture.

The washing of the feet of the disciples was also a ministry of loving touch. You can't wash someone's feet without touching them. What were these feet like that Jesus touched? They were feet shod only with sandals, and they walked on unpaved roads where they would have encountered excrement, both animal and human. Since walking was the main form of transportation, these feet would have been deeply calloused from many miles of walking, perhaps even misshapen to varying degrees. These were the feet touched by Jesus.

Jesus' love includes touch, and so should ours. What does that look like for us? Again, we need to be clear that this is not sexual in any way. Paul was taking a risk to speak with this kind of language, and there is evidence that uninformed outsiders hearing this kind of language of a holy kiss sometimes accused believers of orgies and sexual misconduct. So what kind of non-sexual touch adequately expresses the kind of love we are to have? I think it could apply to any expression of love done in a material way. Certainly a good handshake or a sincere hug would qualify. I think it could also be texting a little less and engaging in face-to-face interaction a little more. Other examples could be making eye contact while you're talking to someone, putting a hand on someone's shoulder as you pray for that person, or simply eating a meal together.

One other point that needs to be made here is that you can only touch one, or at most two people at a time. Embodied love is unavoidably finite. It is not scalable and capable of being mass-produced. To love someone in this way will keep you from loving others. This is because we are finite creatures, and it is okay. We can't do everything, and God doesn't call us to.

III. Dependence

This brings us to our final point on this verse. Following this command to greet one another with a holy kiss will put us in a place of dependence. We just saw that in our previous point. Since we can only touch one person at a time,

we will need to trust God for all the people we can't touch. That is an important part of being able to touch lovingly the person that is before us, allowing us to give our full attention to that one and not be distracted by anxiety or guilt for those we can't touch.

Another aspect of our dependence is in the area of receiving love from others. We see this in the creation of Adam. Before the creation of Eve, we read for the first time that there was something about God's creation that was not good. It was not good that the man was alone, and God took steps to remedy that in the creation of Eve. We are designed to need others. But then we see that after Adam's fall into sin, Adam and Eve are so ashamed that they hide. It is still the case that they need one another because of their design at creation, but now they must live with the insecurity of wondering if they are acceptable. Ever since the fall, we all live in the same insecure space between needing others and fearing that others won't accept us. Perhaps you've experienced this in our "Welcome of God." You long to connect with others, but fear that those in the pew in front of you will talk to the people in front of them, while those behind you will turn around and talk to those behind them, leaving you all alone. You stand there hoping that the music will soon start and that the awkward reminder of your aloneness will soon pass. While the risk of such things happening is unavoidable, our dependence is expressed in not allowing this fear to drive us into self-protective isolation.

The connection between physical touch and dependence can be seen Jesus touching of children. People were bringing infants to Jesus in order for him to touch them (Luke 18:15-17), and the disciples rebuked them. Perhaps they felt that Jesus was too important to devote himself to spending time with those who would not be able to help him overthrow the Roman occupiers. But Jesus corrects the disciples with some strong language, telling them that they should not hinder those coming to Jesus with their babies because only those who receive the kingdom like a child will be able to enter it at all. Jesus is calling us to embrace dependence. This story appears right after the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. While the Pharisee thanked God that he was better than others, the tax collector merely asked for God's mercy. The former was full of self-dependence, while the latter full of childlike humility. One was about achieving, while the other about receiving.

CONCLUSION:

We are called to be like children, acknowledging that we need other people, and more than that, we need God's mercy to us through Jesus. Let Jesus touch you, and let the affectionate touches of others remind of Jesus' love.