

INTRODUCTION

We started our verse-by-verse journey through 2 Corinthians in the spring of 2007, and we have come to the end of the series with this final message. I believe verse-by-verse Bible teaching builds healthy churches, because we can't ignore any part of the Word of God. I've entitled this series "Hope for Cracked Pots" based upon the theme verse found in 2 Corinthians 4:7: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." We're all just a bunch of plain, clay pots—and many of us are cracked pots in a variety of ways. But the glorious truth is that it's not the container that matters, but what's IN the pot. We have the wonderful privilege of carrying the treasure of the life of Christ within us. So, even if you're a little cracked, there's hope for you because the cracks only allow the life of Christ within us to be seen!

I've entitled this last message, "How's Your Aim?" The Apostle Paul ends this long letter encouraging the Christians there to aim at some worthy targets. Let's read these final words found in 2 Corinthians 13:11-14:

"Finally, brothers, good-bye [the word is *charis*, which literally means "grace to you."]. Aim for [then he lists some good qualities that we should designate as personal targets in our faith] perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints send their greetings. [His final benediction is one of the greatest verses in the New Testament to illustrate the Trinity] May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

The word "aim" provides the context of shooting at a target. A target can represent goals in your life. It's sad, but there are many people who never set any goals in their life. They just wander through life with the fatalistic attitude "que será sera," what will be, will be.

A man was hiking through the Blue Ridge Mountains. He walked up to a little farm with an old barn and a farmhouse. On the side of the old barn there were numerous bulls-eye targets, and as he examined them he noticed there was a bullet hole in the exact center of every target. Impressed, he walked over to the ramshackle house where a Hillbilly was sitting in a rocking chair. The hiker said, "Are you the one who did that shooting?" The hillbilly said, "Yep, I shore did." The hiker said, "Sir, you must be finest marksman I've ever met." The hillbilly spat out a some tobacco juice and said, "Naw. Truth is, I shot the bullets into the side of the barn first, and then I jus' drew a target around each bullet hole." Sadly, that's the way many people live their lives. They never set goals, or aim at any worthy targets. Then whatever seems to happen, they draw a target around it after the fact as if that's what they were really aiming at. Someone said: "If you aim at NOTHING in life, you'll hit a bulls-eye every time."

But the most successful people in the Bible and in life are those who set specific goals, targets. There are all kinds of books and DVDs on goal-setting—and there are all kinds of goals. You can have business goals to attract more customers or goals for your family to spend more time together or personal goals like reading more and exercising more regularly. And most of us have goals like that. But how many times do we set goals for our spiritual lives? If you want to see a

change or improvement in that area, you have to set and achieve certain goals. In this passage, the Bible shows us four specific targets or goals that will help us in our spiritual lives.

TARGET 1: KEEP ON GROWING IN YOUR FAITH!

When Paul wrote "Aim for perfection" it reminds us of what Jesus said in Matthew 5:48 when he gave the instruction, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." For years, I read that verse and thought it meant I had to arrive at a point where I was sinless—morally perfect—and of course, I failed miserably! However, I later learned the meaning of the Greek word Jesus used (*teleios*) means to be "in the process of maturing." Luke used this common first century word to describe fruit that was maturing or ripening on the tree.

There were basically three problems in the church at Corinth that Paul had to address and, not surprisingly, they are the same problems in the church today: They all start with "m." The problems were: immorality, immortality (they didn't know what happens after death), but the main problem was immaturity. Paul wrote that he wanted to write to them as spiritual adults, but they were still a bunch of squalling spiritual babies. We have the same problem of spiritual babies in our churches today. According to the Guinness Book of World Records, the largest baby ever born was in Italy in 1955 weighing 10.2 kilograms (which is a little over 23 pounds)! That's a big baby! But I've seen bigger babies than that. I've seen 100-pound babies, 150-pound babies, and even 200-pound babies in the church—adults who have been Christians for dozens of years, but they have never grown beyond spiritual infancy.

The Bible says, "Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity." (Hebrews 6:1) The word "maturity" is the same one translated "perfection" in our text. How many of you have ever been in elementary school? Great! But could you imagine spending twenty or thirty years sitting in that tiny desk writing on lined tablets using those pencils that were so large you had to lay them on your shoulder to write? That would be ridiculous, but sadly, the pews of many of our churches are filled with people who are still in spiritual elementary school when they should be in high school, college, or graduate school. You never graduate from being a growing, learning student of Christ until you matriculate into heaven.

If I was writing a book entitled *Spiritual Growth for Dummies* it would only have four chapters, because I believe there are four common habits of maturing Christians. The first chapter would be entitled: Read your Bible daily. If the only time you feed on God's Word is when you come to hear me or sit in your Sunday Morning Bible Study group, then you'll be spiritually undernourished. The second chapter of my book would be entitled: Pray daily. In the school of Christ, it is essential to get to know your Teacher on a personal level. The best way to deepen your relationship with Jesus is to talk to Him on a regular basis. The third chapter would be entitled: Fellowship with believers regularly. You can't grow spiritually within a vacuum—you need to spend regular time with other followers of Christ. That's why worship attendance and participation in a Sunday Morning Bible Study is essential for your maturity. The last chapter of my book on spiritual maturity would be entitled: Share your faith with others. A sure sign that you're maturing in your faith is when you can start telling others about your personal relationship with Christ.

A wise Christian who disciplined me years ago told me the Christian life is like riding a bicycle. If you stop pedaling, you'll fall over. He wasn't talking about pedaling and straining to be saved, but once you are a Christian, you must maintain these four disciplines of reading the Word, praying, fellowshiping and sharing if you want to keep growing. So your first target should be spiritual maturity.

TARGET 2: PROTECT THE UNITY IN YOUR CHURCH!

The next target Paul highlighted can be found in his challenge that the believers should "be of one mind." Jesus intended His church, His body, should be one unified group of brothers and sisters. However, since the church was born on the Day of Pentecost, His followers have splintered into thousands of branches, sects, and denominations.

You might have seen on the news a few weeks ago that Greek Orthodox and Armenian Priests who work at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem had a knock-down-drag-out fist fight before they started a worship procession. Of course, having studied it for many years, I don't think that's the actual site of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, but they think it is. Can't you picture those men fighting, clawing, and hitting each other with crosses over a minor disagreement? Before we get too critical of those guys, I've been in a few Baptist business meetings that almost got to that point! When the world looks at fighting Christians, they laugh and think, "There can't be any truth to their message."

On the night before Jesus was crucified He prayed that we would be unified so the world would know our message is real. He prayed, "I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (John 17:23)

There are a lot of strange ideas floating around what Christian unity really is. Unity isn't the same thing as uniformity. Some people think all Christians should wear the same kind of clothes, talk the same, look the same, and like the same kind of music. But God never intended to create what I call "cookie-cutter Christians." Real unity is when all kinds of different people gather together and they still love each other, the long hairs getting along with the short hairs (and the no hairs). The blue jean crowd singing next to the suit crowd. The off duty cop with his flat-top walking to Bible Study with the biker with the tattoos and piercings. The kids in their shorts and sandals holding the door for a perfectly turned out matriarch. The Ph.Ds worshipping alongside the high school dropouts. The millionaires praying alongside the people on welfare—that's not uniformity, but it's unity!

Second, unity isn't unification. Some people think we should just lump all Christians groups together and that will be unity. That's not true. I could tie the tails of two cats together and put them in a pillow case and you'd have unification, but you sure wouldn't have unity! Manmade efforts to unify the Body of Christ seldom succeed. We can't create unity, only the Holy Spirit can do that.

While only the Holy Spirit can create unity, we can disrupt unity. To put it another way, the Holy Spirit makes unity, but we can either maintain it or mess it up. That's why we read this admonition in Ephesians 4:3, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." The Spirit creates it, but we must keep it. So how do we do our part to protect the unity of our church? By being of one mind. So which mind is it, my mind, or your mind? Neither, it's the mind of Christ. Philippians 2:5 (KJV) says, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus."

Within the church at large and within every local church there are people who have various beliefs about different points of doctrine. Some people insist the only way unity can exist is when every Christian believes the exact same thing. But I disagree. I can experience unity with another believer even if they don't believe every jot and tittle exactly the way I do. The key to unity comes from a principle that Philipp Melancthon, one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation stated: In the essentials there must be unity. In other words, we must agree on the essential doctrines like God exists, the Bible is God's Word, and Jesus is the only way to heaven. In the non-essentials there must be liberty. In Romans 14 Paul wrote about "disputable matters." His example was whether a Christian could eat meat that had been offered to idols. He said good believers might disagree over nonessentials like that, but we could still have unity. There are many nonessential elements in our faith that we shouldn't fight over even if we disagree. And finally, in all things there must be charity (love). If you and I will agree to agree on the major issues, and then agree to disagree on the nonessentials, and agree to love one another, we can have unity. Are you on target when it comes to protecting the unity of your church?

TARGET 3: LIVE IN HARMONY WITH OTHER BELIEVERS!

The third target can be determined from Paul's words, "live in peace." Harmony is a lot like unity, but the difference is only the Holy Spirit can create unity while living in harmony is something we can choose to do.

Like unity, we don't have to be exactly like someone to live in harmony with them. For instance, next Sunday there will be about 30 musicians on this stage and about 300 singers in our celebration choir. What if every singer and musician sang and played the same notes in unison? It would sound nice, but after a few songs, it would be pretty boring. The thing that will make the music marvelous next Sunday is that everyone will be singing and playing different notes, but they'll be in harmony. In the choir we have basses, tenors, altos, and of course, the sopranos (and none of them are Italian mafia!)

The same is true of harmony among believers. We don't have to all sing the same note, but we have to be tuned into the same pitch. I once learned from a piano tuner that if there were 100 pianos lined up in this room and you tuned the first one to a tuning fork, then put away the tuning fork and tuned each piano to the one beside it, the 100th piano would be terribly out of tune with the first one. Why? There are such minor variations in pitch that it would be impossible to precisely duplicate each piano's pitch. But if you tuned each piano to the same tuning fork, then all 100 would be in perfect tune. What's the lesson? It won't work for you to try to tune your life, spiritually speaking, to mine, even if I'm tuned in to Jesus. Church people get out of tune with each other when we start comparing and criticizing each other and using

anyone else other than Jesus as our measure or standard. Each of us must tune our lives to Jesus Christ, and when that happens, our lives will be in perfect pitch with each other. As the wonderful old hymn says, "Tune my heart to sing your praise." So the secret to maintaining loving relationships in the church is to make sure we each stay tuned in to Jesus.

Christian harmony is like this piano. I can play a "C" that might represent your life. There may be some other "Cs" in your life—people just like you and that's okay, because you really don't have any trouble with getting along with them because they're a lot like you. There are others in your life who are different from you like this "G." They aren't like you, but you get along, because they harmonize well with you—the same with people like the note "E." But the problem comes when you have to deal with someone who is like a C-sharp. Do you know anyone like that? Sure you do. And then someone comes along who is a "B" and there's more disharmony. I wish I could tell you that you will be able to harmonize and get along with every person in this world, but the Bible never says that. What if someone just refuses to harmonize with you: You change, and they change too and there's still disharmony? The Bible says you should only be responsible for your actions. That's why Paul says, "Live in harmony with one another ... if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (Romans 12:16, 18) Don't worry about how someone else is or isn't getting along with you—you just keep your eyes on Jesus and do all you can to restore and maintain harmony and then leave it in God's hands.

Christian harmony is your third target.

TARGET 4: SHOW AFFECTION TO MEMBERS OF GOD'S FAMILY!

Paul concludes this letter with the instructions to "Greet one another with a holy kiss." This isn't the only time we read this instruction, he adds it at the end of five of his letters, so it must have been important. So let's talk about kissing for a moment. But we aren't talking about some kind of Hollywood romantic kissing, this is a holy kiss, but just because romance has borrowed kissing it doesn't mean we should disobey this command.

Have you ever heard preachers or teachers say a kiss on the cheek was the general social custom of the time, and that today since our custom is shaking hands we should substitute a handshake instead of a kiss? That sounds good, but it causes us to miss a very important point. All it takes is a study of the secular customs of the Roman culture and you will find that kissing on the cheek was *not* a regular form of greeting among friends—they would actually shake hands—or men would grasp each others' forearms. Haven't you seen the movies? Spartacus says, "Andronicus, how are you?" And he grabs his forearm. Actually handshaking originated to show that a person was not hold a knife or sword in their hand.

During the time Paul wrote this, a kiss on the cheek was a custom reserved for family members. It's the same with us; we kiss our children, our parents and grandparents, and our brothers and sisters, but we rarely kiss strangers. The point Paul was making is that the people in our church aren't strangers; we're part of the Family of God. We're brothers and sisters in Christ, and when we gather together it's like a family reunion. I never really liked for my Aunt Gertrude to kiss me because she wore a lot of lipstick and I usually had to wipe it off my face, but I sure loved her banana pudding so I endured her kisses! In other words, we should show the same affection

here that we show to our biological family—maybe even more! Now I'm not advocating a frenzy of kissing, I'm just saying we ought to be free to express holy affection to one another. That's a lot better than getting one of those dead-fish handshakes and a mumbled "Hello."

Their lack of affection was one of the issues Paul addressed earlier in his letter when he wrote, "We have opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us." (2 Corinthians 6:11-12)

Seriously, we need to ask ourselves what happened to a family atmosphere where it is easy and normal to express affection to one another? In the early church, it's obvious they had this atmosphere of intimacy and affection. Believers would gather and hug each other and kiss each other on the cheek, like family members. But as time passed, the persecution ended and prosperity corrupted the church. Instead of kissing each other, they would kiss the common cup and pass it to the next person. Or they would kiss a "thing" like a cross, or a relic. Then the Professional Christians (the priests) erected a rail to separate the clergy from the laity and the priest would kiss the cup or the stole he wore. The main thing the worshiper did was to sit and watch the performance of the priest. And we are the results of this cold, impersonal spectator Christianity which doesn't resemble the warm, loving, affection of the original church.

Our world is getting more and more impersonal. People have friends now in social networks like MySpace or Facebook and they may never see them or touch them. I've said before the more high-tech our world becomes, the more high-touch the church must become. The church should be a safe place where someone can come receive a hug and a holy kiss. The Beatles were right in their ballad about Eleanor Rigby, "ah, look at all the lonely people." Dr. Paul Tournier has written: "The most devastating malady of our day is loneliness—there is no human condition so acute—and so universal. Up and down the pews of every church are lonely people who have a desperate need to be loved and to show love in return."

Harriet Jacobson wrote: "Why does a person go to church? He may be trying to fill up an emptiness that he feels, a longing to find meaning in life. If he is an authentic Christian, he is probably looking for Bible teaching and preaching—and he wants to worship God. But it is safe to say that whatever other motives brought him to church, down underneath, he came to be with people—to be a part of a group—to find fellowship with other human beings, to make friends. Seated in his pew, that may be full, he is surrounded by people but as he leaves the church no matter how the sermon or music may have impressed him, he leaves with definite feelings either of having been made warm by a touch with his fellow worshipers or having been among many, but somehow alone." (*Crowded Pews & Lonely People*)

CONCLUSION

So now that you have some spiritual targets—aim at those targets and fire away. The first three targets may take time, but the fourth target is one you can hit right now. In a minute I'm going to ask everyone to express affection to one another.

I was in Brazil a couple of weeks ago and the Christians there express affection according to this last verse. The men shake hands and then go into a bear hug. The women shake hands and then

plant a kiss on your cheek. It's almost like an air-kiss sometimes, but I found myself really enjoying it. I preached in a church with about 300 people present and I stood at the back door with the pastor as the people filed out. I bear hugged every man and kissed every female on the cheek. The people were passing by so fast that I got confused a couple of times and almost kissed a guy and bear hugged a lady! I like that custom.

Over the past two years we've discovered we're just a bunch of cracked pots. But even with our imperfections and faults, we are valuable to God because of the treasure we contain. Because we're valuable to God, we should value all the other cracked pots around us. Remember, cracked pots need to be handled with care—so hold them gently and hold them closely!

OUTLINE

THEME VERSE: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." *2 Corinthians 4:7*



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"Aim for perfection"

"Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity." *Hebrews 6:1*



TARGET 2: PROTECT THE UNITY IN YOUR CHURCH!

"be of one mind."

"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." *Ephesians 4:3*



TARGET 3: LIVE IN HARMONY WITH OTHER BELIEVERS!

"live in peace."

"Live in harmony with one another ... if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." *Romans 12:16, 18*



TARGET 4: SHOW AFFECTION TO MEMBERS OF GOD'S FAMILY!

"Greet one another with a holy kiss."

"We have opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us." *2 Corinthians 6:11-12*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes