

“Be Watchful”

The Thirty-Second (and Final) in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians: 16:1-24; Leviticus 23:15-21

In the last chapter of 1 Corinthians, we are reading someone else’s mail. As Paul wraps up this epistle, we learn a number of things. We find Paul’s personal comments about those in the Corinthian church who have earned the Apostle’s respect and who should serve as examples to the Corinthians. We read of several exhortations which Paul extends to members of this church who are struggling to leave behind pagan ways of thinking and doing. We also learn of Paul’s personal desires and future travel plans, and we see the Apostle bristle a bit in defending his flock. So, even though this letter is addressed to a particular congregation (Corinth), we learn much about the early church and the expectations that the Apostle had for this congregation which he helped to found. But what Paul says to the Corinthians, he says to us as well.

As we conclude our series on 1 Corinthians, we now come to the end of our study of this remarkable letter. As we look back at the ground we have covered, it is apparent, I hope, how important this letter is for those of us living in the midst of a pagan culture here at the beginning of the 21st century. There is, perhaps, no letter in the New Testament which speaks as directly to the issues we face as a congregation as this one. The religious and cultural issues facing the Corinthians are very similar to those with which we must deal here in Southern California. As we have seen, the comparison between Orange County in 2010s and the Corinth of 55 A.D. is simply remarkable.

One of the problems with preaching through an entire letter like this one is that Paul intended this letter to be read aloud in the church in one hearing. If you listen to an audio file of 1 Corinthians, it takes about 40 minutes or so. But it has taken us thirty-two, thirty-minute sermons (and nearly an entire year) to make our way through this letter. Because of this, many of us have forgotten a number of the things Paul has addressed earlier in this epistle. So, I would encourage you to sit down and read through this entire letter again (or listen to it on audio in one sitting), now that we have concluded our study. It is an interesting exercise to see how such a letter strikes us both before we study it, and after we spent so much time working through it. But I do hope that we see the importance of this letter and that we become as familiar with it as we are with Romans and Galatians.

Having concluded his response to the report from the members of Chloe’s household (1:11) about the factions plaguing the church, and the unwillingness of this church to discipline erring members, as well as responding to the questions put to him in writing by the Corinthians (7:1) about marriage, the sacraments, gifts of the spirit, the proper manner of worship, speaking in tongues, and the resurrection, Paul now wraps up this letter with a number of specific instructions about collections for the poor, a discussion of his travels, before Paul proceeds to offer personal greetings to the Corinthians from the brothers and sisters in the church in Ephesus.

In verse 1 of chapter 16, Paul writes, “*Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.*” The grammar of this verse tells us that Paul is introducing a new topic—namely the taking of a collection. This is one of several instances in Paul’s various letters mentioning a collection being taken among the Gentile churches for the poor of Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8-9; Romans 15:25-32). As recounted in the Book of Acts, this collection was one of the reasons for

Paul to undertake yet a third missionary journey.¹

This particular collection was very important to Paul since he was not only concerned about the well-being of his own people (the Jews), but relief from Gentiles would demonstrate that Christian charity was not tied to race or ethnicity. While Paul speaks of this offering as being “for the saints,” the reference to Jerusalem in v. 3, makes it clear that this offering is for the poor in Jerusalem—i.e., Jewish Christians. Unlike the Jews, who taxed synagogue members a half-shekel annually and then sent the money to Jerusalem to support the temple (based upon their understanding of Leviticus 23:15-21, our Old Testament lesson this morning), Paul clearly intends this to be a “free-will” offering based upon charity (as the motive) and prosperity (the basis for the size of the offering). Paul’s instructions here are the reason why Christian churches collect “free-will” offerings and should not “tax” congregations.

The reason why this collection from the Gentile churches is so important is that Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were suffering greatly at the hands of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling body). Having become followers of Jesus, Jewish Christians were considered apostates from Judaism, and were openly persecuted. Jewish Christians were no longer entitled to benevolence and gifts distributed by the Sanhedrin and the synagogues, and there are several references to a severe famine in the Jerusalem area (Acts 11:28-30) at the time. Under such circumstances, things were very difficult for the church in Jerusalem. Paul is very concerned about his Jewish brethren in the Jerusalem church.

An offering from Gentile churches would do a great deal to heal any rift which still existed between Jewish and Gentile Christians, especially since there had been such an important debate (recounted in Acts 15:1-35), about the mission to the Gentiles and the Gentile’s obedience to the law of Moses. A successful offering from the Gentile churches scattered throughout the Eastern Mediterranean region would demonstrate solidarity between the Gentile churches and the Jerusalem church would do much to unify Jew and Gentile. It would also lend great credence to the Gentile mission among the leaders of the Jerusalem church who were understandably reticent to send missionaries to the Gentiles when the Gentiles did not understand their culture, and when their own people (the Jews) were so openly hostile to them because of the Jerusalem church’s mission to the pagan Gentiles.

In verse 2, Paul instructs the Corinthians how such an offering is to be taken. “*On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.*” Paul mentions a couple of things in this verse which are important but easily overlooked. For one thing, it is abundantly clear that the church met on Sunday for worship (the first day of the week). The reason for the change from worship on the Jewish Sabbath to the first day of the week (the Lord’s Day) has to do with the fact that Jesus rose on the first day of the week, the sign of the new creation, which universally became the day of Christian worship.

Paul also instructs “each” of the church members to set aside a specific sum of money based upon income. While Christians are to give freely as they are able—there is no specific amount of money mentioned, i.e. “a tithe”—all the Corinthians are to give something, in accordance with whatever measure each one has prospered. The application for us is simply that all Christians are to give to the poor according to measure in which God has blessed us.² We know from writings of the church fathers (i.e.,

¹ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 810.

² Morris, 1 Corinthians, 233.

Justin, *Apology* 1.67.6), that offerings were collected during the Lord's day worship service, which reflects the practice of the Christian churches since that time.³ This is also why we take an offering during our worship service, because giving our gifts to Christ's church is itself an act of worship.

Furthermore, Paul does not want any last minute offering collected immediately before his visit. Collecting offerings from God's people for the poor (and then later for the administration of the church) are to be part of the church's weekly worship. Everything we have and then freely give in return, is to be consecrated to the Lord. We are to give because it benefits others, and we are to give because it is good for us to do so. When we give, we are reminded that all we have comes to us from the hand of God.

In verse 3, we also see a practice from the early church which has carried over in modern times in some of the churches (i.e., the Canadian Reformed Church)—a letter verifying membership. *“And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.”* Letters of commendation were very common in the ancient world, and Paul will send them with those who physically carry the offering to Jerusalem. This letter verifies that the messengers are from Paul and also explains the purpose of the offering. Churches today will give such letters to their members who travel (or who go on vacation), so that they can then present themselves to the consistory of the church they visit, so as to be admitted to the Lord's Supper. Not a bad practice.

Having been approved by the church, the messengers from the Corinthian church would then go on to Jerusalem with the offering. Not only does this establish a direct connection between this largely Gentile church in Corinth, and the first Christian church in Jerusalem, it also frees Paul to continue his missionary duties without entangling himself with finances (and any potential trouble that goes with it). Regardless, Paul will do what is necessary. *“If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.”* Should it prove to be advisable for Paul himself to return to Jerusalem from Ephesus, then he will accompany those chosen by the Corinthians when they transport the offering.

In verses 5-7, Paul takes the occasion to let his friends in Corinth know about his upcoming travel plans. The Apostle informs the congregation that he might need to spend the winter in Corinth, depending upon how things work out in Ephesus. *“I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.”* Paul has already hinted at a return visit to Corinth (4:19—*“But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills”*), but now he is much more definite about a future visit. After he travels through Macedonia (the region to the north of Corinth), visiting the churches there, he hopes to end up in Corinth to spend the winter there. Rain and cold weather greatly disrupted travel in the first century world—even with the excellent Roman system of roads.

While Paul is not certain of his plans, Corinth would not only be a good place to spend the winter, it would enable him to stay for a longer period of time—something which is quite important to him. This would give the Corinthians the chance to help Paul to prepare to be ready to go wherever the Lord sends him next. Paul will not only need supplies, but also means of travel (ship, draft animal, wagon, etc.). No doubt, the Corinthians will be able to help him with these arrangements.

The fact that Paul again states in verse 7 that he wants to make an extended stay, indicates how serious he

³ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 233.

is about making this visit, and yet, Paul is fully aware, that the Lord may intervene and send him somewhere else. In the meantime, we can see in verses 8-9 that Paul's immediate plans are settled. "*But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.*" While there is much for Paul to do if and when he gets to Corinth, the fact of the matter is his current labors are not yet finished. Therefore, he will stay on in Ephesus until Pentecost (the Jewish feast), because the Lord has opened the door there for an effective work—the perfect tense indicates that the door remains open, even though, Paul still faces a great deal of opposition to his work throughout the city as recounted in Acts 19, when the merchants of the city rioted, because the converts to Christianity were no longer buying pagan trinkets.

In verse 10, Paul discusses the possibility of his young pastor friend Timothy coming to Corinth before Paul can arrange his own visit. "*When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am.*" Paul had already mentioned in this letter the possibility that he might send Timothy to Corinth because of the current crisis the Corinthian church is now facing (cf. 4:17—"*That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church*"). Paul instructs the Corinthians to take care of Timothy—should he arrive. Paul's comment that the Corinthians are to make sure that they set Timothy at ease, may refer to the fact that Timothy was young, and may have been a bit timid.

But whatever the case, as we read in verse 11, Timothy comes with Paul's full blessing—as a minister of the gospel, Timothy carrying on the Lord's work, just as Paul is. "*So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers.*" Given the unfortunate divisions and factions within the Corinthian church, there is the possibility that some might reject Timothy as a duly appointed representative from Paul—wanting Paul to come immediately instead of sending Timothy later. There is even the possibility that since Timothy was considered by some among the Corinthians to be "on Paul's side," Timothy might be refused permission to minister in Corinth. So, Paul instructs the Corinthians to make certain this is not the case. And then, after Timothy finishes his work in Corinth, Paul anticipates Timothy joining him, along with some unnamed brothers.

In verse 12, Paul speaks about a future visit to Corinth from Apollos, who had already spent some time in the city among the believers there. "*Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity.*" No doubt that the Corinthians held Apollos in high esteem and in their letter to Paul they may have pled for Apollos' return to minister to them. Paul had likewise strongly urged Apollos to go to Corinth with some unnamed brothers, but at the time of this writing, all that Apollos agreed to do, was to consider going at a later time. Since Paul speaks of Apollos quite affectionately, this would diffuse any concerns in the church that Paul did not think highly of Apollos, or that Paul had not done everything in his power to make sure that Apollos came to help out.

As Paul begins to wrap up this letter, in verse 13, the Apostle makes a series of brief exhortations to the Corinthians. The first of these exhortations is for the Corinthians to "be watchful." "*Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.*" The verb is in the present imperative, indicating a command. The word literally means to be on the alert and not sleep. It is often used in connection to the second coming of our Lord (cf. Matthew 24:42 ff; 25:13), and this is probably the meaning here—especially in light of the previous chapter (and the discussion of the resurrection of our bodies occurring at our Lord's

return).⁴ Paul also exhorts the Corinthians to stand firm in the faith, something which the Corinthians were struggling to do, especially in the face of so many challenges—some of which were self-inflicted. The Corinthians are to act as men, that is, they are to demonstrate courage as well as resolve in the face of the serious difficulties facing this congregation. But they must remember that the strength they need comes from God, who will freely give them everything they need.

But this is not all. “*Let all that you do be done in love.*” It is significant that the command to do everything in love, follows the command to behave as men.⁵ It is not only necessary to watch and stand firm in the face of trouble, but it is important to watch and stand firm in the right way. Our motivation throughout all of this is that love we are to have for our brethren, since all Christians have been baptized into the one body of Jesus Christ—a single body with many different members. This is why all that we do—even when it involves some sort of spiritual combat, and even though Paul uses military metaphors and strong language—is to be done in love. No one is to act in their own interests, even while standing firm and acting like men! We must do all these things in love, including defending the faith and disciplining erring members.

Considering all that the Corinthians have been through as a congregation, Paul gives them examples to follow. The first of these is that of Stephanus and his household—people whom Paul himself had baptized. As we read in verses 15-16, “*Now I urge you, brothers—you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints—be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer.*” Stephanas and his household are devoted servants of Christ, and the Corinthians are to submit to such people, because they are good examples to them, and because these people are devoted in their service to the Corinthians.

In verses 17-18, Paul can say of others, “*I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such men.*” Paul makes it clear that he is glad to have such men as co-laborers with him, because they had unique gifts and abilities (along with the maturity) which the Corinthians so desperately lacked. Not only were such men an encouragement to Paul, refreshing his own tired and worn-out spirit, but the Corinthian congregation needs to recognize their gifts and acknowledge their service. They already have very capable men in their midst.

In verses 19-24, Paul sends his final greetings. Remember, these are people whom he knows well and for whom he is very concerned. “*The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.*” In Paul’s day, Asia is Asia Minor (modern Turkey/northern Syria), and Paul sends greeting from the churches of this region (including the region of Galatia and from the cities near Ephesus). Aquilla and Pricilla (a husband and wife) were widely known throughout the churches. We know from Acts 18:1-3, that they moved from Rome to Corinth after the edict of Claudius in which all the Jews were expelled from the city. They were allowing Christians to meet in their home, just as they had done in Rome (Romans 16:3-5).

Although some have recently argued that this comment establishes that house churches are to be the norm, this simply a matter of expediency. This couple owned a home (probably a villa) with sufficient

⁴ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 238.

⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, p. 238.

room to hold meetings (a large covered patio). It wasn't like there were plenty of churches/synagogues in town available for rent. There were many public spaces in which meetings could be held, but the art (much of it sexualized) and architecture of the guild halls and public buildings was dominated by pagan themes and images—hardly the proper for Christians to conduct public worship.

There are other greetings for Paul to extend as well. *“All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.”* The unnamed brothers are in Ephesus with Paul as he writes this letter. I am convinced that the greeting to which Paul refers is actually a handshake, not a kiss and there must be some sort of textual problem here. *“I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.”* Unlike the Book of Romans when Paul used a professional scribe (Tertius) to write down the letter which was actually sent, Paul penned this letter to the Corinthians himself. It is written in his own hand.

In verse 22, we come to what at first glance is a rather surprising comment from Paul. Paul pronounces a curse upon all those who do not love the Lord Jesus. *“If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come!”* The solemn curse is followed by an apostolic blessing. Given the thorny issues with which Paul has had to address throughout this letter, when he pronounces the word of curse, Paul is probably referring to those in the church who name the name of Christ, but who divide the church and agitate God's people, or else he's referring to those outside who persecute the church, or to both.

But the curse is immediately followed by the Aramaic expression, *Marantha*, which means, “Come, O Lord!” Since Greeks would not have used this language, the expression must have come from the Palestinian church, an indication that this was an early and common Christian benediction. It was already widely used throughout the churches, along with words like “Amen” and “Hallelujah.” From the very beginning, Christians have longed for our Lord Jesus to return.

And so, as is his custom, Paul closes with a benediction for his readers/hearers and offers a heartfelt personal expression of his love to those in the Corinthian congregation. *“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.”*

What do we take with us by way of application?

If we are to learn anything from our study of 1 Corinthians, it is this. We are not only individual followers of Jesus—people who personally trust in Jesus' death to save us from our sins, and who know that Jesus' perfect righteousness covers our unrighteousness—we are also together members of Christ's church. To be Christ's disciple through faith, is to at the same time to be a member of his body. When we come to faith in Jesus, we are added to the church. Although we are justified as individuals, we are not sanctified in isolation, nor are we to live our Christian lives apart from Christ's church.

Remember, Paul's Corinthian letter was not written to Fred and Jane, but *“To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.”* To be a Christian is to be conscious of our duties and obligations to each other and to Christ's church. There is a gospel to believe, to proclaim and to defend, but there is also conduct appropriate to our membership in Christ's church. That proper conduct, therefore, is what this letter is all about

So, let us as a church do as Paul exhorts us to do. *“Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.”*