

PERSONAL WORDS FROM A SPIRITUAL FATHER

1 Corinthians 16

Introduction:

We have come to the final chapter of the book of 1 Corinthians. It has been a long process working our way through this letter written by the Apostle Paul to a deeply troubled and divided church in Corinth. I am sure it was not an easy letter to write. Paul addressed many difficult and challenging issues. At times he was forced to be very direct, even confrontational as he dealt with theological and behavioural errors and issues in the Corinthian church.

But it was all because of his love and concern for them. He was concerned for the spiritual life of the believers there. He was concerned for the testimony of the church there. He was concerned that the conduct of the Christians in Corinth was bringing the name of Christ into dispute and bringing shame on the church and the reputation of Christ. And so, he spoke rather harshly at times as he reproved, rebuked and corrected his spiritual children in Corinth.

But, as a father who loves his children, it seems that he did not want to leave them stinging from a harsh rebuke. He wanted to reassure them that, despite the discipline that he had to administer, he still loved them and cared dearly about them. And in the last lines of this letter we see that love portrayed as he addressed them on a very personal level.

I struggled with how to deal with this chapter. I considered titling this message, “Ministry is About People” because Paul talks about many of the people that are crucial to his ministry and are very important to the believers in the Corinthian church. But I decided to go a bit broader in scope and so I have called it, “Personal Words from a Loving Spiritual Father.” I have divided Paul’s closing words into four sections:

- Sharing with those in need
- Making plans and seizing opportunities
- Honoring and supporting fellow workers in service to God
- Final greetings and goodbyes

Sharing with Those in Need vv. 1-4

“Now concerning...” Paul’s first comments here seem to be addressing another question that had come to him in a letter from the Corinthian church. He used that phrase several times in this letter as he addressed a variety of question they had asked – see 7:1.

Let’s read vv. 1-4... The immediate context and application of these verses is very specific. The church in Jerusalem was facing great need, perhaps because of some drought and famine. But even more than that, the Jerusalem church, being primarily Jewish, was facing intense persecution from the Jewish leaders there, resulting in lack of employment and hostility from society. Many found themselves lacking in the basic necessities of life. So, the churches in Macedonia and Achaia were collecting funds to help them out.

Paul’s comments in these verses offer some specific instruction to the believers in Corinth regarding this collection. We need to be careful not to try to build a whole theology of giving around his instruction. However, there are certainly some principles that are worth noting.

First, there is the matter of having a heart that is willing and anxious to share with those in need. A little bit later, in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul addressed this matter again – chapter 9. There he praised the Corinthian believers for their zeal in this matter. We can learn a lesson from that.

Obviously, we cannot meet or respond to every need that comes to our attention in our information-saturated world. But when we see someone in need, do we do what we can to respond to that or do we turn the other way?

A second principle has to do with the idea of organized, regular giving—setting aside funds regularly for the work of the Lord. Again in 2 Cor. 9 Paul goes into great detail about the principles of giving, using the analogy of sowing and reaping...

We do not have time to go into that in great detail and that is not the point of this message today. We need to move on and look at the next area of Paul’s final instructions to this church.

Making Plans and Seizing Opportunities vv. 5-9

Paul was in Ephesus when he wrote this letter during his third missionary journey (v. 8). Pentecost was a spring harvest festival that occurred seven weeks after Passover, so Paul was probably writing this in the springtime somewhere in that period between Passover and Pentecost. As he looked ahead, he was making plans for his continued journey. Again, there are a few things worth noting, for our own benefit.

First, plans always need to be subject to divine direction and changes. The Apostle James emphasized that in his epistle, when he told his readers not to boast about tomorrow, but rather to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." (James 4:15)

Here Paul outlines some of his plans, hoping to visit the church in Corinth and spend some time with them. But he qualifies all of his plans with that phrase in v. 7 – "...if the Lord permits." We must always allow the Lord to interrupt or change our plans, whether it is in our day to day activities or in the larger life choices and decisions that we face.

There is a second important idea to note here in verse 9. Paul has just indicated his intention to remain in Ephesus until after the Pentecost celebration. But his reason for doing so is rather interesting.

Read v. 9 – did you catch the thrust of Paul's statement? He is determined to remain in Ephesus because a wide open door for ministry has opened before him. But then he adds that statement, "...and there are many adversaries." I see two thoughts in that statement that are important for us to note.

One, opportunity and opposition often go together. Paul knew that with the opportunities for ministry he would also face trials. In fact, often the problems, trials and times of opposition provide the greatest opportunities for us to grow in our own lives as well as to reach out in ministry to others. Some wise person has said, "There are no problems, only opportunities." I have often heard Henry Vandermeer say that slightly differently, "Every problem is an opportunity for growth."

The other note here is the fact that Paul did not take it as a reason to leave or move on when faced with adversity. And neither should we.

Honoring and Supporting Fellow Workers in Their Service to God vv. 10-18

I mentioned earlier that I considered giving this message the title, "Ministry is about People." This is the section that led to that idea. In vv. 10-18, Paul names about a half-dozen people who were important to him in ministry, along with some instruction for the Corinthian believers regarding how they should respond to these individuals. There are a few thoughts that come from these verses that I would like to consider:

1. Support and encourage those who are starting out in the ministry. Timothy was a young man. It would be easy to look down on him and be critical of his work and ministry. But Paul says... vv. 10-11. We have just had the opportunity to build into the life of a young ministry couple – Justin and Jennifer. I hope and pray that they left here feeling helped and encouraged.
2. Recognize the will and desires of those who serve. Paul had urged Apollos to travel to Corinth, but Apollos did not feel led to do that – v. 12. We must always recognize and accept the Lord's direction in the lives of those who minister to us.
3. Respect, support and submit to those who labour for us and are over us in the Lord – vv. 15-18. You can see Paul's love and concern for the people in Corinth, even as he admonished them and reminded them of their obligation to those who ministered to them.

People were important to Paul. Not just people in general, but Paul cared deeply about individuals. We see this here in the closing words of this letter, as well as in many other letters that Paul wrote to the churches. He ends several of his letters with words of personal greeting to people in the churches—people he knew personally and appreciated for their contribution to the ministry. That is a reminder to all of us about the importance of honoring and supporting those who serve us in the ministry.

In the middle of these instructions about his co-workers in ministry, Paul injects a rather forceful directive regarding their own faith and ministry – *read vv. 13-14*. I am not going to say anything more about these verses; I think Paul's words speak for themselves...

Final Greetings and Goodbyes vv. 19-24

But now, we have come to the final few words of Paul's letter to this conflicted and confused church. *Read vv. 19-20.*

Aquila and Priscilla (referred to in the ESV as Prisca) first appear in Acts 18. They were from Rome and had come to Corinth when the Jews were forced out of Rome by Claudius. There they met Paul, when he was on his second missionary journey. When he left Corinth, they went with him as far as Ephesus, where they were now living.

Now Paul was back in Ephesus, writing to the church in Corinth. I can just imagine Aquila and Priscilla saying to Paul, "When you send that letter to Corinth, make sure you say hi from us." Paul did so, along with words of greeting from others as well.

Paul then closes his letter with a few words of encouragement and admonition written by his own hand. It is generally believed that Paul's eyes were not good, and his letters were mostly dictated to a companion who would write down his words. But he often concluded his letter with a personally written note.

Read vv. 21-24 – There are four statements in his closing note:

- A word of warning
- A word of anticipation
- A word of benediction
- A word of personal affection

The warning is for those who have drifted from or turned away from love for the Lord. The anticipation is for the coming of the Lord. The benediction is a recognition of and a prayer for God's grace in their lives. The final word is a reminder that even though he has been forced to be harsh with them about some matters, he loves them dearly as brothers and sisters in Christ.

I am not going to add any further application, as much of what is in this chapter has been applied as we have worked our way through it. And I trust that the Holy Spirit will continue to apply these truths to our hearts in the days and weeks to come.