

Sermon 63: 1 Corinthians 16:13-24: Parting Words

OUTLINE

Exhortations
Commendations
Greetings

INTRODUCTION

In a sermon as you come to your conclusion, after you have made your points and argued your points, you draw all that you have said together often in short and pithy statements to impress something upon the heart and mind. Paul's parting words in 1 Corinthians are very similar. 1 Corinthians has the second highest word count of Paul's letters and Paul has spent 16 chapters putting out fires and dealing with various matters, how do you bring all of that together in some short sharp ideas. We see as we bring this letter to a close that Paul does this with some exhortations; some commendations and some greetings.

Exhortations

V13-14, 'Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. ¹⁴ Let all that you do be done in love.' Cast your mind back and think with me again about some of the contents of this letter and what Paul has written to address. Chapters 1-4 dealt with the problem of divisions that revolved around following favourite preachers and the philosophies of this world. In Chapter 5 he had to deal with a church discipline case for sexual immorality. Chapter 6 raised the problem of Christians taking each other to court; and Paul giving a theology of the body as he addressed the lingering problem of practices related to idol prostitution. In ch. 7 he handled the matter of divorce, marriage, remarriage and singleness. In ch. 8-10 he spent time dealing with the question of eating meat offered to idols showing us that ethics in a fallen world is often complex and not simple. Then in 11-14 he dealt with several matters related to the church worship service; some were casting off good cultural norms that affirmed creation norms as women disposed of traditional dress; we saw the Lord's Supper being abused as many came in a loveless fashion; we saw the immaturity and narcissism of those who forced themselves and tongues onto the church with no regard for what edified; Paul had to write a whole chapter on love to address a major failing in the church. Then in chapter 15 Paul had to take the Corinthians back to the basics of the gospel to battle some worldly thinking as some were rejecting bodily resurrection. Chapter 16 wound down as Paul dealt with some practical matters related to the collection for the saints and his travel plans, and now here he is trying to sum it all up. How do you sum all of that up? Paul does so with 5 exhortations in v13-14.

'Be watchful.' This comes from the Greek word 'gregoreo' from which we get our English name Gregory. It can mean 'awake' as well as be vigilant/alert. As the apostle Paul analyses the Corinthians situation and the cause for their weaknesses, he pinpoints their lack of vigilance. They were successful; they had the gifts active in their midst; they counted themselves to be well informed and knowledgeable; they were casual in their brushes with the sexually immoral aspects of the Corinthians culture; they were playing with fire with regards to eating meat offered to idols in temple settings. They were not taking their weakness; nor the real spiritual threats seriously, so Paul calls them to

watchfulness. 1 Pet. 5:8-9, 'Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.' It is easy for us to grow complacent, to forget the war we are within, to forget that we have enemies on every side, even enemies within. Paul is not asking us to watch the markets to know when we should be buying or selling bitcoins but for those threats to our holiness, the truths we believe, the unity of our fellowship, and the mission we have been called to. Jesus instructs on how to be watchful, Mark 14:28, 'Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' In prayer we remember who God is, who we are as sinners and saved children, what sin is, who our enemy is; and it is in prayer that we are able to ask for strength from the one who is willing to give, who alone is strong enough to help us prevail, and will perfectly supply what we need. The sins of the Corinthian church occur through a lack of watchfulness. Are you being watchful? Have you set a guard over your thoughts not allowing sinful imaginations; over your eyes not watching those things that stimulate you to sin; over your ears, are you discerning with the spiritual food you take in or do you just everything that calls itself Christian without discernment? Do you play on the fringes with the sins of your culture, like the Corinthians? They went to the idol temples for the free meat and participated in idolatry; they visited the temple prostitutes justifying the indulgence of their appetites; they tolerated sexual immorality in their midst and did not remove the leaven from the lump.

'Stand firm in the faith.' Paul sees that the Corinthians have been wowed by the powerful personalities and clever words of philosophical ideas; and some have even denied something that is basic to the gospel, bodily resurrection. The Corinthians are not standing firm in the faith, but see other worldviews and truths and philosophies as having authority, and they have allowed their loyalty to these other ideas to lead them to tolerate certain teachers and ideas. Remember what Paul said at the beginning of ch. 15:1-2, 'Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. And then he reminded them of the faith, v3-4, 'For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.' Do not be frightened off of these truths, don't not give into the peer pressure that is seeking to make these truths that include miracles seem ridiculous; don't be ashamed of the glorious truth of a God who has every right to judge us loving us instead and paying the price that we deserve to save us. Paul writes to the Philippians, 1:27, 'Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and not frightened in anything by your opponents.' Glory in these truths, lean into them, stand firm in them, unite in striving for it. This is what Paul is calling for. Jude writes, v3, 'Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.' Are you standing firm or are you toppling? Are you standing with both feet firm in the faith as revealed in the scripture are do you have one foot in the faith and one in your own ideas gleaned from the world around you? There is only one safe place to stand.

'Act like men.' Here is a verse to trigger feminists. Everyone in the church is to act like men! Paul is obviously using the reference metaphorically. In that

context manliness was associated with strength and conviction. It was men who went to battle; who faced attackers, who laid down their lives. Paul is saying that this strength, this bravery, this courage is what we all need to exercise as we live out our faith in a world that is set against us. There is likely another element that Paul is drawing on here too, the idea of maturity versus immaturity. You will remember that Paul has accused the Corinthians of being immature, 3:1-3, 'But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?' Paul is saying this in reference to their divisions. Then in 1 Cor. 14:20 when addressing their excessive and loveless behaviour around the gifts he writes, 'Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.' Paul is saying grow up, pursue growth. Do not have a Peter Pan spirituality, he was the boy who never grew up. The Corinthians had stagnated in their growth content with head knowledge, big crowds, spiritual experiences, but were not growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ; they were not growing the fruits of the Spirit, especially not growing in love. There is no mystery around this spiritual growth, Peter writes, 2:2, 'Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.' Fill your mind and heart with the word, meditate upon it, let it convict you, correct you, and guide you into God's will; be doers of the word and not hearers only, this is how we grow. Are you a babe that still needs to be fed on milk, or are you growing?

'Be strong.' There is a lot of overlap with standing firm and acting like men in the call to be strong. It means to take that which is weak and faltering and make it strong and sturdy. Paul unpacks a little bit more of what he means when he says something similar to Timothy, 2 Tim. 2:1-6, 'You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, ²and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. ³Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. ⁴No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. ⁵An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. ⁶It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.' Paul says to the Ephesians, 6:10-11, 'Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.'

The last of these opening exhortations is v14, 'Let all that you do be done in love.' Lovelessness we know was one of the main causes for conflict in Corinth. A lack of love led to divisions, to a lack of faithfully applying church discipline, to taking each other to court, to being inconsiderate of the weaker brother when eating meat offered to idols, to the abusing of the Lord's Supper and the destructive use of spiritual gifts. Paul wrote a whole chapter addressing this hole in their holiness. Love puts others first; love goes the second mile; love covers a multitude of sins; love prays for God's highest blessings for those it loves; love puts its money where its mouth is, love protects the reputation of its loved ones; it refuses to believe the worst and lies about their loved ones without proof; and love will risk the disapproval of their loved ones telling the truth when they are on a self-destructive path. So let's test ourselves, do we do everything in the church with love, are we serving others in love even in unrewarding ways like cleaning. Are we sacrificial in the giving of our time, the use of our homes, the giving of our money, in that service, because love is willing to sacrifice. Love

values the relationship over justice and forgives, pursuing peace, seeking to be at peace with all as far as it depends upon them. You pray for your loved ones, don't tell me you love the church, shows me your prayers for them. Love will not entertain a lie about those it loves, believing the best, not even trying to villainize them to their own hearts; they will not spread a lie or slander and defend their good name when they are attacked. Love will give the bruise of a friend and confront in sin.

Commendations

V15-18, '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— ¹⁶ be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer. ¹⁷ I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, ¹⁸ for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people.' Following up on the problems of divisions, and following up on having favourite leaders and not giving due respect to those to whom it was owed, Paul advocates for those leaders from the household of Stephanas. A good relationship between leaders and congregation is key. So many things can poison that relationship and there had been no shortage of challenges as false teaching, favouritism, slander, in-fighting, jealousy and ambition are some of the things we have noted in the letter. Just as Paul has given a word of commendation for Timothy encouraging the congregation to treat him accordingly, Paul now does the same for Stephanas. Paul speaks of their faith and their service record. Paul mentions that they were among the first converts in the province of Achaia, firstfruits anticipating a further harvest; and how they have practiced things like hospitality. He uses the description of devoted, which is a strong word the KJV translates as 'addicted', it means to tie oneself to, they bound themselves over to it. Paul puts front and center their service which is countercultural to the values that the 1st century world would have been looking for in a leader. Paul is reflecting Christ's teaching of leaders being servants, and these leaders have distinguished themselves in this regard. Paul uses the word service/diakonia underlining their servant leadership.

In chapter 1:16 Paul indicated that he baptized the household of Stephanas as some of the few that he did in his ministry in Corinth. The notion of household baptisms has been a controversial point, those of a paedobaptist persuasion insist that there must have been some babies in at least some of the household baptisms mentioned; and those of a credobaptist view emphasize how the descriptions of all of those baptized agree with believers being baptized. As a credobaptist I would point to the fact that the household as a whole is described as 'converts'. But I think there is another detail here which could strengthen the credobaptist view. You will notice that Paul calls the Corinthian church to submit to the household of Stephanas. Now we would automatically intuit that Paul does not mean the wives of the household; or the babies or children of those households. We would assume it would be the male leaders who are likely elders and this is confirmed with the addition of fellow workers and labourers as a description. This then acts as an instance where the word household does not mean everyone in the household, but is used as an inclusive term like headache which may only be describing sinus pain or a pain in one temple. The credobaptist view argues that if the added descriptions add qualifications to what is meant by household, then the descriptions of those who receive the

Spirit, spoke in tongues, rejoiced in the book of Acts also limits what is meant by household.

We don't know anything about Fortunatas and Achaicus. These are the sorts of names you would give slaves, names like Lucky/fortune; and Tex for someone from Texas, as Achaicus means son of Achaia. A best guess is that these men are freedmen, former slaves who have gained their freedom.

The Corinthians it seems were prone to treating their leaders like we treat our politicians and this was resulting in great difficulty in the church. Paul reminds us that we are to respect those who are put over us, that their service should be recognized and emulated, and that we should avoid bringing in the favoritism, party politics, critical spirit, disrespect that so often creeps into how we treat those who have sacrificed much to serve.

Greetings

V19-23, 'The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. ²⁰ All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

²¹ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. ²² If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come! ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. ²⁴ My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.'

This closing section is filled with greetings and a few importance closing thoughts. Firstly, we see greetings from the churches in Asia. Ephesus was the central town in the province of Asia and Paul would be able to send greetings from all of them. In particular the greetings of Aquila and Prisca/Priscilla are sent. These are Jewish believers who had been kicked out of Rome, were tentmakers and had become close partners with Paul in the work. They ministered in Ephesus, Rome and it appears Corinth as well. They ran a church from their home, this was the most common way to do church given the church was not yet established. Thirdly, Paul even sends greetings from all the brothers, he was in contact with many believers and wants the Corinthians to feel the bond of love from all believers in all places. Following this series of greetings the Corinthians are likewise encouraged to recognize and greet one another with a holy kiss. This was a greeting for close acquaintances and here it is encouraged in a context where not only family and friends would be but rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile. We can see the great unity we have in Christ that should shape the way we treat, even greet one another. The usual barriers that divide are overcome because of our oneness in Christ. we recognize each other and give family affection to each other. We are not required to imitate a holy kiss but the equivalent of a warm and welcoming greeting. Paul then even greets them with his own hand. Letters were often written by a secretary, here Paul adds his signature as a personal touch and a token of authenticity.

But Paul, does not end it there. There are still three things he wants them to be left with. Firstly, the second coming of Christ. v22, 'If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come!' The curse uttered here is thought to be connected to the fact that when Jesus returns all those who do not believe in Him; who refused to believe; who chose a life of sin instead of repentance and service to Him, they will receive the due punishment for their sins, they are under a the curse of the law and will finally be condemned. But for the Christian

that day is a great day of joy. Paul has spent a whole chapter talking about the trumpet sounding and we all being changed and death being swallowed up, these thoughts are summarized not merely as a fact but as a heart cry from Paul, Maranatha, an Aramaic prayer meaning 'Our Lord Come.' It is not only Paul's desire but the desire of all of God's people. It will be a day of judgement for those who do not know Christ, but the best of all days we see Him face to face and are rescued from all evil.

The second thought is a benediction, v23, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.' What would normally be well wishes at the end of a letter is a gospel reality. If you are a believer, you are no longer under law but grace; and all of God's dealings towards you are on the basis of grace; His grace is sufficient for every need and abundant beyond our sins. We live not under His condemnation, with a fear of judgement but in His good graces as His adopted children. This is the assurance we have. Because Jesus died on the cross for our sins and reconciled us to God grace is ours.

The third and final thought is a personal one from Paul, v24, 'My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.' Paul has had to say some hard words, and use the shepherd's staff for correction. Paul assures them of his own personal love.

Well our journey has come to an end. The Corinthian church was a carnal church, yet still God's people. They were afflicted with the problems that many churches suffer from and there is much for us to take to heart. Paul's closing exhortations are timeless and timely so let me end with his exhortations. V13-14, 'Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. ¹⁴ Let all that you do be done in love.'