

## Serving His Family in Love

1 Corinthians 16:12-24

Due to the lockdowns, social isolation and other related factors brought upon by the pandemic, there was a rise in suicides in 2020. According to a CNN report, teens contemplating suicide reached 25%. In Japan the rise in suicides was so high that it prompted the Japanese government to appoint a “minister of loneliness” in an attempt to reduce the social isolation that has been linked to the increase in suicides.

We were created for togetherness, which is why, even before the fall, God declared that it was not good that man should be alone (Gen. 2:18). Loneliness speaks to a human longing and its very existence points to something common to us all. As Lydia Brownback explained, “Loneliness is an indicator that something is missing, and that something is found only in Jesus Christ. He completes what’s missing, that thing we identify as “loneliness,” beginning from the moment we are joined to him in faith and brought to completion in glory. In other words, the primary reason we are lonely is that we aren’t home yet.”

Now the unintended consequences of lockdowns and social isolation has not only deepened the loneliness in the world, it has also led many believers to spiritually drift from home—from that place of refreshing fellowship with God and His people. They’re no longer in a place where they are manifesting and maintaining the fellowship of Christ in community with other believers as heavenly witnesses to the world.

To be a witness to the world and sustain spiritual health and vitality, Christians must maintain the unity of the faith in the bond of peace and love. As Paul explained in His letter to the Corinthians, like a human body made up of different parts, the church, the body of Christ is made up of believers uniquely gifted by the Holy Spirit so that we can grow together, serve one another and work cooperatively to minister God’s grace in a lost and lonely world (Acts 2:42).

**Main idea:** Healthy Christians, who make up healthy churches, devote themselves to the service of the saints.

To unfold this theme, we are going to examine 5 characteristics of a healthy Christian who builds up the church by serving others to the glory of Christ.

## 1. Be Watchful

As Paul begins to wrap up his letter to the troubled church of Corinth, he gives several charges that summarize all that he's been teaching them. Leading up to the first charge to *be watchful*, Paul gives a brief report about Apollos who was well known to the Church of Corinth. He writes: "*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*" (1 Corinthians 16:12). Apollos, who was well known to the Corinthians as a minister of the gospel, was urged by Paul to visit the church, but he was not disposed to go at that time. We don't know the exact reason why he was not willing to go, but we can be sure it wasn't because he was unconcerned for the Corinthians. No doubt as Paul himself indicated in verse 8, although Apollos wanted to return, he did not have the opportunity because he was engaged in the work of the Lord. Apollos was alert to where God was working and how God wanted to use Him.

With this in mind, notice that after explaining that Apollos was not yet disposed to return, Paul gives a series of charges to the Corinthians. He writes: "*Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong*" (1 Corinthians 16:13). The phrase *be watchful* is repeatedly given to believers throughout the New Testament by Jesus in the gospels and in the letters of Paul and Peter. To be watchful means to be alert or awake. In context it means to be consistently discerning or aware of what God is doing in you and around you.

Remember that back in verse 8 Paul explained that although he wanted to travel to Corinth to spend meaningful time with the church, it was not the right time because a wide door for effective work was opened to him in Ephesus. And the same seems to be true of Apollos. Although Paul was urging him to travel to Corinth, the time wasn't

right for him. Not because it was inconvenient, but rather he was discerning that he had work to do for God where he was. Do you know that when you're not discerning spiritual realities and not participating in what God is doing around you, you are more prone to having a critical spirit or even to be used of the enemy to sow discord? Concerning Christians in Thessalonica who were idle, Paul wrote, "*For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies*" (2 Thessalonians 3:11). "Recently our friend Daniel Henderson tweeted, "You can watch us row the boat. You can help us row the boat. But please don't sit in the boat shooting holes in the bottom of the boat."

Are you awake and alert to the desperate needs of the world and to what God is doing in you and around you? Are you sober and aware of the dangers of social media and other subtle ways the enemy seeks to manipulate your attention away from the things of God? Or are you so distracted and preoccupied with the things of this life that you are unaware of the schemes of the enemy and essentially asleep at your God assigned post? The Lord is saying, wake up, be alert, be watchful!

While doing some pre-marital counseling the other day, the boyfriend kept falling asleep. At one point the girlfriend gave him one of those elbows and whispered, wake up. How many of you know, we need to stay close to spiritually discerning believers who when they see us dosing off to the things of God, will give us a spiritual elbow and urge us for Christ's sake to wake up.

## **2. Be Warlike**

Secondly, Paul not only urges the Corinthians to be watchful, but to **be warlike**. Notice Paul in rapid succession also charges the sleepy Corinthians to "*stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong*" (v.13). All these exhortations, including the charge to be watchful, denote a military kind of preparedness that calls for soldiers to be battle ready. When Paul charges the Corinthians to *stand firm in the faith*, he's warning them against giving any ground to the false teachings that would move them away from the truths of the gospel of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Sadly, many churches today

have given up much ground to the world by turning the pulpit into a source for self-help messages that tickle the ears of those who have no appetite for sound doctrine. Consequently, rather than producing Christian soldiers who can stand strong for Christ and be lights in the midst of the darkness, in many churches discipleship has become nothing more than a Christian spin on living the American dream.

Now after the charge to *stand firm in the faith*, Paul exhorts the believers in Corinth to *act like men*. By this charge Paul doesn't mean that only masculine men can be faithful Christians. This charge applies to all in the church, both men and women. When Paul gives the charge to *act like men*, he's drawing some general parallels between being mature men and being faithful Christians. In other words, he's calling on believers to be courageous defenders of the faith. He's calling on the Corinthians, who were more focused on claiming their rights, to focus on discharging their responsibilities in the service of the kingdom of God. He's calling them to work hard and as Paul also explained in 2 Timothy 2:3: "*Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.*" In 2 Timothy 2:3 Paul also goes on to explain that "*No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.*" That is to say, although faithful Christians may have to work a secular job to make a living, they do not live for their secular jobs. They understand that this world is not a playground, but a battleground and they have marching orders from heaven to fulfill.

And as Paul explained in Ephesians 6, because our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil, he not only calls Christians to *act like men*, but to also *be strong* (v.13). In fact, before he wrote about the spiritual forces that faithful Christians are up against, Paul also exhorted Christians in Ephesus 6 to *be strong*. But the strength that Paul is talking about is not physical strength. Paul adds in Ephesians 6:10, "*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.*" And to be strong in the Lord we must put on the whole armor of God, which essentially means to live according to your full identity in Christ as revealed in His word and realized more fully through prayer.

### 3. Be Warm

Thirdly, to be healthy Christians who build up healthy churches in a hostile world, not only must we **be warlike**, but we must **be warm**. After giving his military type charges to the Corinthians, Paul writes: “*Let all that you do be done in love*” (1 Corinthians 16:14). This call for all to be done in love points the Corinthians back to 1 Corinthians 13 where Paul breaks down some of the qualities of love.

Now after calling the Corinthians to be warriors, this call from Paul to do all that we do in love seems almost contradictory. Can Christians be both warlike and warm? Well the bible says that Jesus is both a lion and a lamb. You know, in some ways the Corinthians knew how to stand firm for what they believed was right, but the problem was that they didn’t do so in love or for love. Their motives were often self-centered and self-promoting.

You know, we are to stand for the truth without compromise. But there are some truths, like the fact that you have liberty in Christ to eat pork, that love may compel you to give up when you’ve invited a Muslim friend over for dinner who you’re trying to win to Christ. The call to *stand firm in the faith* is not an excuse to be ugly, nasty or arrogant when speaking the truth. Rather we are called to speak the truth in love.

Being a good soldier of Jesus does in no way negate the call to do all things in love. Rather the love of Christ will compel us to live as good soldier of Jesus Christ and endure hardship so that others could come to know the saving message of the gospel. As one bible teacher explained, “Without love, you will not be [watchful] and discerning, but rather narrow minded and suspicious. If you stand firm without love, you will be an isolated fanatic, ugly in temperament, and intolerant toward the lost. Without love to balance your maturity, you will be critical, [condemning] and harsh. And if you are strong yet have no love, you will lack the tenderness that will attract others to your bridled strength” (Chuck Swindoll).

### 4. Be Workers

Fourthly, healthy Christians who make up healthy churches must **be workers**. Paul continues, *“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 — <sup>16</sup> be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer”* (1 Corinthians 16:15-16).

Notice here that Paul’s final instructions to the Corinthians involved a man and his family who all had an honorable reputation among the Corinthians. In addition to being the first converts when Paul first arrived in Corinth, the household of Stephanas was known for their devotion to the service of the saints. Now after highlighting their devotion in serving the church, Paul urges the Corinthians to be subject to this faithful family and to other fellow workers and laborers in the church. In addition to Stephanas, Paul also recognizes two other men that together with Stephanas had come to Ephesus to be with Paul. He writes: *“I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, <sup>18</sup> for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people”* (1 Corinthians 16:17-18). In regards to these 3 men, who were all devoted workers of the church in Corinth, Paul says that they were men that not only refreshed his spirit, but also refreshed the spirits of the Corinthians back home.

How many of you are thankful for the refreshment that comes from the devoted service of Spirit filled Christians? We all need to receive it and we all need to give it. And let me add that what makes the devoted service of the saints a refreshment to the soul is when it’s done in love.

Now knowing the kind of sacrificial devotion these men had demonstrated through their refreshing labor to the church and to Paul, he urges the Corinthians in verses 16 and 18 to submit themselves to these men and give them recognition. The culture of Corinth tended to value and give recognition to men with great oratory skills and flare. And because they valued giftedness over character the church was full of strife, division and jealousy. So, in his final words, Paul reminds the church that character demonstrated through loving devotion and

service is what will give refreshment and bring the church together in love to shine for Christ in a dark world.

As one bible teacher also explained, “A common bond is realized through loving and self-giving service for the refreshment of others. Leaders are refreshed by members even as members are refreshed by leaders. Each member is equipped to refresh others in the gospel. Gospel refreshment is multidirectional. It’s in this context that one must understand the interesting pronouncement in verse 22: “If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed.” If we do not love someone, that person’s rejection of us is meaningless. Paul is simply saying, if someone chooses not to respond to the love of God in Christ, then let him remain outside the blessings of this community on the basis of his own decision. We will not be bothered by this unless we actually desire to be a part of the community. The common bond is realized through honoring and recognizing the contribution of each member of the community. We ought to be liberal and generous with the recognition. While the surrounding culture reserves recognition for those who stand head and shoulders above the rest, the church seeks for ways to recognize and honor members of the community for ordinary gospel work” (Stephen Um).

How would you describe your involvement in the local church? Like the household of Stephanus, are we devoted to the service of the saints? As one Pastor noted, “It’s often the few that obtain the blessing for the many” (Al Toledo). How many of you know, the church owes a debt of gratitude to those faithful few whose devotion to the church often goes unnoticed. Let’s all do our part to show our gratitude and honor to them by giving them strong support while we do our part to serve the church in love to the glory of Christ.

## **5. Be Welcoming**

Finally, to be healthy Christians that make up healthy churches, in addition to being watchful, warlike, warm and workers, we must **be welcoming**. As Paul begins to close out his letter, he shares the greetings of the saints separated by hundreds of miles. He writes: “*The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together*

*with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the lord. <sup>20</sup>All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss. “I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand” (1 Corinthians 16:19-20).*

Last week we saw that the self-absorbed church of Corinth, which was distracted by its own problems, needed to look away from themselves and look to the desperate needs of the saints in Jerusalem. By doing so they could become aware of their pettiness and begin to see that the church is bigger than their own congregation and that the mission transcends their own ministries. In the same way, these greetings that Paul shares from other saints outside of their local fellowship, demonstrated to them that the church of Christ extends beyond the local church in Corinth.

But the cliquish church in Corinth not only needed to be reminded of the loving fellowship that existed outside of their church, they also needed to be reminded of the loving fellowship they needed to cultivate in their own local church. So in addition to sending them greetings from the churches of Asia and a more personal greeting from Aquila and Prisca and the church in their house, Paul exhorted them in verse 20: *“Greet one another with a holy kiss.”*

I appreciate Chuck Swindoll’s thoughts on this: “Their own local church, marred with schisms, desperately needed to foster an environment of acceptance and forgiveness. Even today, in our stiff, hands-off society, in which real personal relationships and life-on-life intimacy are cheapened by online networks, many of us feel afraid to literally reach out and embrace somebody. We would just as soon text them, email them, or leave a voice message. But we need to freely give and receive tangible signs of affection—the squeeze of a hand, a friendly embrace, a genuine expression of affirmation. One of the best ways to truly communicate our love to others is through personal presence and tangible contact.”

As I shared last week, thank God for technology, but virtual church, which is an oxymoron, should not and cannot be a substitute for physical presence and tangible contact. We need to respect the space

of others and never force ourselves upon anyone. But we cannot allow a culture of isolation to dictate the culture of the church or deter us from the loving affection that must be appropriately cultivated in the church for the health of the body of Christ and to the praise of His glory and grace.

Remember, that Paul wrote this letter to bring much needed instructions and correction to a church that because of a lack of love, was not displaying the unity that must characterize the church of Christ. And because of the lack of love, they were poor witnesses to the world of the reconciling power of the gospel. As Adrian Rogers suggested: “Far more damage is done in our churches by those who are not spirit filled than those who are drunks. Far more harm is done by people who are trying to do the work of God in their own flesh.”

It’s important to note that the instructions Paul gives for how to be healthy Christians, who make up healthy churches devoted to the service of the saints is not something they can do in their own strength. You cannot give what you don’t have. This is why Paul writes in verse 22: *“If anyone has no love for the lord, let him be accursed. Our lord, come.”*

Remember to understand what Paul is saying in his pronouncement we need to interpret it in the context of Paul’s instruction for the church to serve one another in loving fellowship. To be accursed is to be separated from the loving fellowship of God and His people who live in the hope of Christ’s return. So what Paul is saying when he writes: *If anyone has no love for the lord, let him be accursed*, is that if someone chooses not to respond to the love of God in Christ, then let him remain outside the blessings of this community as a consequence or his own decision.

But when you know the love of God not only will you love God and look forward to Christ’s return, you will also love what He loves. And understanding that we cannot know His love apart from being strengthened by the Spirit in our inner man, Paul concludes: *The grace of the lord Jesus be with you. <sup>24</sup> My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen”* (1 Corinthians 16:23-24).

The Apostle Paul understood that the only thing that could heal the disunity in the church was for the grace of God to be with them. This is why he not only ends his letter with the benediction *the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you*, he also began his letter by writing, *grace to you* (1 Corinthians 1:3). To put it another way, Paul begins his letter with grace to you, and he ends with grace be with you. And the point is that Paul knew that through his letter, which was inspired by the Holy Spirit, grace would be imparted to the Corinthians in order to strengthen them to be the church that God called them to be.

Notice that Paul concludes his letter with the benediction not only for the grace of God to be with them, but he writes: *“My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen”* (1 Corinthians 16:21-24). Paul wanted them to know that despite their flaws he loved them. But more than that he wanted them to experience his love which was rooted in Christ Jesus. Because it’s knowing His love more fully through the work of the Spirit within that compels us to be devoted to the service of flawed believers to the praise of His glory and grace.

## **Conclusion**

A community that experiences the love of God will be compelled to share the love of God with one another. As believers we can know his love more deeply through the grace that comes to us as we commune with God and one another in prayer and the word.

Remember that our first calling is not ministry, but intimacy. Ministry is the overflow of intimacy. As we daily draw near to God may His love overflow in our lives and enable us to be watchful, be warlike, be warm, be workers and be welcoming while we devote ourselves to serving one another for the greater fame of Jesus.