

# 1 Corinthians: A Letter to a Troubled Church

*A Church That Loves* (1 Corinthians 16:1-23)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on November 5, 2023

## Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're wrapping up our series in 1 Corinthians. We've titled this series "A Letter to a Troubled Church" because that's an apt description of this young church. Based on what we learn in Acts, by the time Paul wrote this letter, the church could've only been a few years old (4-5?). It's a young church. And yet it was already plagued with so many problems. That might sound discouraging. But it's actually encouraging.
  - Think about it. **If a church – whose founding pastor was Paul himself – if even that church faced big obstacles and had to deal with unhealthy factions forming and divisive people stirring up trouble, then why are we surprised when it happens to us?** Why would we be exempt from similar trouble?
  
- ❖ **There's a tendency for Christians to grow disillusioned with the contemporary church and to begin to speak wistfully of the early church.** You often hear them say, "You know, we just need to get back to the early church. If we could only go back to doing church like the early Christians." They want to return to this age of innocence. When the church was pristine. Unspoiled by institutional power. Free of hypocrisy or deceit. That's the basic assumption people have of the early church.
  - But after studying 1 Corinthians, it becomes apparent that there never was an age of innocence. There never was a time when the church was free of hypocrisy, free of infighting, free of divisiveness. **The church of Corinth demonstrates that even if you have the greatest Christian evangelist leading you to faith and the greatest Christian pastor and planter founding your church – you're still going to have problems.** You're still going to deal with competing factions, divisive people, perverse immorality, and false teaching.
  
- ❖ **Because every church – no matter the era – is made up of sinners.** Redeemed and converted sinners. But, nonetheless, sinners in the flesh. So we're bound to fail in spectacular ways like the church in Corinth. Look, I'm *not* saying you shouldn't hold the church to a high standard. I'm *not* saying you should never be disappointed with the church. I'm just saying you shouldn't be shocked. And you shouldn't lose hope either.
  - **I hear a lot of talk these days about the dechurching of our society.** How we've been seeing a significant rise in the dechurched – those who have left the church. Who have disassociated themselves from organized religion. And it largely seems to be a reaction to perceived problems in the church. Many professing Christians are deeply disillusioned and disappointed with the church.
  
- ❖ But as the saying goes, "Disappointment is the gap between expectation and reality." What if our expectations of the church have not been grounded in reality? What if what's needed is a more realistic perception of the church. **Once we realize that we've been treating the church as a museum for saints when, in reality, it's a hospital for sinners –** that's when we realize that that's not fair. That's not realistic. And that's when we begin to readjust our expectations. And begin to grow in patience and long-suffering when we have to deal with disappointing churches or disappointing Christians.

- ❖ That's what encouraged me studying this letter. It's helped me ground my expectations for *our* church. I'm reminded that the same sinful tendencies in Corinth can easily manifest among us. **The same problems could arise in our church threatening our peace and unity. But I'm also reminded that the underlying solution remains the same.** The solution to our problems is love.
- ❖ I know that sounds trite and cliché. But it was Paul's whole point in chapter 13. Love is the answer. And he returns to it here in chapter 16. Now, at first glance, this chapter seems like a hodgepodge of instructions and travel plans and greetings. There doesn't seem to be an overarching theme. But a theme begins to emerge when you take v14 as a key verse that strikes that same note that Paul has been ringing throughout this letter. Listen to v14, "*Let all that you do be done in love.*"
  - **If love is the motivating force behind all of our actions – and not just any kind of love but the love of God in the gospel – if that love begins to characterize our community, then we do well.** Now we won't be perfect. We might still disappoint at times. But we won't lose hope because we'll still have love.
- ❖ As we walk through these concluding remarks in chapter 16, I want to take v14 as our theme verse. And what we see in our text are instructions from Paul on how a church can practically love each other and the wider body of Christ. There are five instructions that stand out. We'll briefly consider each.

### **By Giving to Meet the Needs of Fellow Christians**

- ❖ **The first instruction for how to love is by giving to meet the needs of fellow Christians.** That's the subject of vv1-4. Paul is preparing them to participate in a global relief effort where churches are being mobilized to help other churches financially.
  - Some background context is needed here. During his third (and last) missionary journey, Paul was putting together a large-scale aid package for the church in Jerusalem and other churches in the surrounding region. The believers in these churches were facing significant financial hardship. We're not sure the cause. It could have been a famine (the reason behind a prior relief effort in Acts 11:28-30) or it could have been due to persecution. **The key feature of this relief effort is that Paul was targeting churches in predominantly Gentile regions and mobilizing them to give aid to predominantly Jewish churches.** (cf. Rom 15:25-33; 2 Cor 8-9)
- ❖ This was a very important and personal project for Paul for two reasons. **(1) This collection for the saints was a tangible act of gospel charity.** It was a way to love others as Christ has loved us. Though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich (cf. 2 Cor 8:9).
  - The Jerusalem church exemplified this spirit of gospel charity. In Acts 4:34, we're told there was not a needy person in their church because those who had much were more than willing to help those who had little. But now, the entire Jerusalem church had little and they were all in need. Now it was time for other churches to step up.

- ❖ But not only was it an act of gospel charity, **(2) This collection for the saints in Jerusalem was a tangible expression of gospel unity.** It was a way to show their love for Christ and his gospel. Remember, Paul was specifically asking Gentile Christians to step up and meet the needs of Jewish Christians. That would be a beautiful display of their unity in Christ in spite of their cultural differences and historic hostilities. In Romans 15:27, he explains that since Gentile Christians were recipients of the spiritual blessings that flowed from their Jewish Christian brethren (who first brought them the gospel) – now it’s their chance to be of service to the saints in Jerusalem by means of material blessings. It’s only fair (2 Cor 8:13-15).
- ❖ So that’s why this project of bringing aid to the saints in Jerusalem was so important to Paul. Now let’s look at v1 and the specific instructions he gives to the Corinthian church. *“<sup>1</sup>Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. <sup>2</sup>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.”*
- ❖ Let me make four observations about how they were to conduct their giving, and I’ll make some brief application. **(1) Notice how their giving was to be conducted regularly.** Every Sunday – on the first day of every week – when they gathered as the church, they are to give. The point is to form a regular habit. The spiritual practice of giving shouldn’t be erratic or merely occasional. We should be giving regularly.
  - And according to Paul, it’s a good practice to give weekly. This is why most churches throughout history have incorporated an offertory in their Sunday worship, every first day of the week. And it’s why we do it every Sunday. We’re preserving an ancient practice and reminding ourselves that giving is worship.
- ❖ **(2) We see that their giving was to be conducted systematically.** Paul says *“each of you”* so he’s expecting every one of them to receive this instruction and to thoughtfully participate by putting something aside each week and storing it up. And it’s likely that each of them weren’t individually storing up a stash in their own homes. Because Paul’s point is that, when he arrives, he doesn’t want to make another appeal and go around collecting house to house.
  - So what does this mean for us today? Do we have to put funds aside each week to give to the church during the offertory? Well, that is why it’s there. But don’t look at it as a matter of law or some strict rule. **The point is for you to come up with your own system for giving.** The goal is for you to have a plan where you’re giving regularly. Which means not putting it off until the end of the year and giving one huge lump sum right before the tax deadline. If that’s the urgency for you, then it says a lot about your motivation for giving. Having a system in place where you regularly give helps make it clear that it’s about God and others – and not just about a tax credit.
- ❖ **(3) Notice how their giving was to be conducted proportionately.** Paul says, *“to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper”*. The point is that we give according to our means. **And if God graciously causes us to prosper and our financial means increase, then we increase what we put aside proportionately.** That’s what Paul means.

- ▶ That's why when we think about giving, it's not helpful to think strictly in terms of a tithe – of ten percent of your income. I think that's a good starting point. But Christians often treat it as the ceiling. It's the most they'll give. But in Scripture, a tithe would've been viewed as the floor – the starting point. Give at least a tithe of your income – and if the Lord causes you to prosper more, then you have the joyful privilege of giving more. Of exceeding a tithe.

- ❖ **(4) And lastly, it's important to note how their giving was to be conducted freely.** Without compulsion. Without shaming you into action. That's why Paul wanted the collection to be completed before his arrival. He didn't want to directly oversee it. Because he knew his presence might put too much pressure on some people to give. He wants them to give and to give freely. Not reluctantly nor under compulsion – for God loves a cheerful giver (cf. 2 Cor 9:7).
- ❖ Brothers and sisters, I know that in the past year or so we've been challenging you to give in different ways. To sponsor children in Vietnam through World Vision. To donate towards the purchase and renovation of the building next door. To faithfully give your offerings towards the ongoing ministries of our church. We've been asking you to dig deep. But I hope you recognize how this is all motivated by love. Love of God and God's people should be the driving force behind our generous giving.

### **By Showing Hospitality to Visiting Christians**

- ❖ So that's the first instruction for how to love each other. Here's the second – love by showing hospitality to visiting Christians. That's what Paul mentions in vv5-12. He's informing them of his upcoming travel plans. You see, Paul is writing from Ephesus, which, in those days, was situated in the Roman province called Asia (we still call it Asia Minor).
  - ▶ He says he'll stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, which in the Jewish calendar is celebrated fifty days after Passover, which is always in the spring. So it's springtime as he writes, and when summer arrives he plans to travel across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia (northern Greece) to visit churches. And then travel down to Achaia (southern Greece) to stay with them in Corinth through the next winter.
- ❖ Then, in vv10-11, Paul gives them instructions to receive Timothy with hospitality. He's on his way to Corinth to minister to them and teach (4:17). Considering how some in the church have rejected Paul and his apostleship, he's concerned that his young disciple might be similarly mistreated. Listen to v11, *“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.”* **The Corinthians have a perfect opportunity to show Christian love by showing Christian hospitality to a visiting brother in Christ.**
  - ▶ They certainly intended to show that kind of hospitality to Apollos the next time he came to town. Based on v12, it appears that the Corinthians had written to Paul requesting for Apollos to visit. Paul says he strongly encouraged him to, but Apollos had his reasons not to go at this time. Perhaps at a later opportunity.

- ❖ Now if you recall, back in chapter 1:12, some in the church were forming factions around the personalities of certain church leaders. Some were rejecting Paul and claiming to follow Apollos. That context makes Paul's words in v12 all the more significant. He wasn't threatened by Apollo's popularity. He didn't see himself in competition with the brother. They were co-laborers in Christ. What a great example of putting aside ego and prioritizing the work of the gospel.
- ❖ **But my goal here is to point out how, from early on, there has been a common practice of churches receiving visiting Christians and showing hospitality.** Church members would open up their homes to missionaries or other Christian leaders with itinerant ministries. Paul could expect this from the Corinthians. It was common practice back then.
  - Brothers and sisters, let's make sure this remains a common practice among us today. **We frequently have visiting pastors in town for speaking engagements or we have our supported missionaries back from the field on furlough.** We often have Christian young people here for a few months during the summer doing an internship. All of these believers would be in need of temporary housing. All of them would be greatly blessed and loved by your hospitality. If any of you feel moved to open up your home and practice hospitality for people in these kinds of situations, reach out to me or any of the other pastors and let us know of your interest and we'll connect you with visiting Christians whenever opportunities arise.

### **By Standing Firm in Gospel Truths**

- ❖ A third instruction for how to love each other is by standing firm in gospel truths. Look at v13, "*Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.*" Here Paul gives a general exhortation to be watchful. To be on constant alert. For what? For anything that might make you waver in the faith or to stray from the truths of the gospel. That's why it's followed up with another exhortation to "*stand firm in the faith.*" When he goes on to say, "*Act like men,*" Paul basically saying, "Be courageous." Be strong and courageous. A very common exhortation found in the OT.
- ❖ **As he concludes this letter, Paul recognizes that all of the major issues he's been addressing stem from a rejection of gospel truth and an embrace (consciously or not) of pagan Greco-Roman values.** Think back to all the problematic issues we've covered. There were ten in total. They were dividing over their allegiance to different church leaders (1:10-4:21). They were tolerating incest (5:1-13). They were bringing lawsuits against each other (6:1-11). They were excusing sexual immorality (6:12-20). They were confusing the role of sex in marriage (7:1-40). They were divided over the eating of food previously offered to idols (8:1-11:1). Their women were rejecting the wearing of head coverings (11:2-16). They were abusing the Lord's Supper (11:17-34). They were misusing spiritual gifts (12:1-14:40). And they were denying the future resurrection of the dead (15:1-58).

- ❖ I don't have time to point out the pagan values underneath the surface of each issue. But the point is that if a church doesn't watch out – if it doesn't stand firm in the faith, if it's not strong and courageous to stand against the cultural tide of competing values and assumptions – that church will be caught up in successive waves of troubling issues like in Corinth.
  - **Every church needs to familiarize itself with the contemporary cultural values assailing its members.** What are the particular competing worldviews or truth claims surrounding us today – that undercut the authority or veracity of gospel truth? We need to identify them and address them with God's truth. And help each other stand firm in the faith. To be strong and courageous and not to be swept away.
  
- ❖ **This is why the Family Life ministry has organized a conference on the first weekend of December on *Faith, Sexuality, and Gender*.** A college friend of mine who runs a family life ministry called CrossLife is going to address an array of contemporary issues related to sexuality and gender and to help us think Christianly about these tough topics. It's important – not just for the sake of defending truth – but for the sake of showing love. Again, love of God and God's people motivate us to stand firm in the faith.

### **By Submitting to Church Leaders Devoted to Serving You**

- ❖ The fourth instruction Paul gives for how to love as a church is by submitting to your leaders who are devoted to serving you. This is the subject of vv15-18. Paul mentions the household of Stephanas. This brother and his family members were the first ones in Corinth to convert to Christianity when Paul came preaching the gospel. Paul said back in chapter 1 that Stephanas and his family were some of the few believers that he personally baptized.
  - Apparently, Stephanas matured in his faith and had been appointed a leader in the church. He has devoted himself to serving the church. In fact, he, along with two other brothers (Fortunatus and Achaicus), had volunteered to travel to Ephesus to visit Paul and bring the church's letter to him. Paul appreciates their refreshing visit and urges the church to submit to these men and their leadership. And to give them the recognition they deserve.
  
- ❖ **Paul has no reservation or hesitation in calling Christians to submit to their church leaders.** He's not worried about the misuse of power or the abuse of authority. Because the members of the church should only be appointing into positions of church leadership those who consistently exhibit a heart attitude that's "*devoted to the service of the saints.*" If you're choosing leaders who love to serve and who view their service as a means of loving you – then you too can be subject to such as these with no reservation or hesitation.
  - And that's how you return their love. **Your submission to the pastors and elders and deacons of this church – and recognition of their calling to lead – is a beautiful expression of love to them.** That attitude enables your leaders to lead with joy and not with groaning. And having joyful church leaders is to your advantage. Listen to Hebrews 13:17, "*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*"

## By Demonstrating Affection in Culturally-Appropriate Ways

- ❖ Now the fifth and final instruction for how to love each other as the church is found in vv19-23. We love by demonstrating affection towards each other in culturally-appropriate ways. In Paul's day, it would've been through a holy kiss.
  - He wraps up by sending greetings from – not just the church in Ephesus – but other churches in Asia. He mentions Aquila and Prisca and the church that meets in their house. This couple shows up in a number of places in Acts and Paul's letters. They were fellow tentmakers and huge supporters of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles.
  
- ❖ Now, in v21, we read, "*I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.*" What's happening here is that Paul is taking the pen in his own hand and writing out these last few concluding sentences. It was common practice in those days for letters to be transcribed by secretaries. Most of Paul's letters were probably written that way. **So only until the end did Paul pick up the pen and sign off with a personal greeting.** Expressing the importance of loving the Lord and longing for the Lord's coming. And praying for his love and the Lord's grace to be with them all after they finish listening to this letter being read aloud at church.
  
- ❖ Now what I want to draw our attention to is in v20. Paul encourages them to "*greet one another with a holy kiss.*" **That's understood to be a simple kiss on the cheek. It was a culturally-appropriate expression of brotherly affection in those days.** And still is in many cultures today.
  - But it's usually not understood that way in our context. Post-COVID, many people are hesitant to shake hands – let alone share a hug or a kiss. So we have to exercise judgment and sensitivity. But the principle remains the same. If we're a spiritual family – if we're brothers and sisters in Christ – then let's love each other like family and express the affection that you'd appropriately expect between family members.
  
- ❖ If that means a hug or side hug; a handshake or fist-bump or high five; whatever is normal and considered appropriate within our families and within our culture – **let's not shy away from demonstrating affection for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.**
  - As we were reminded in chapter 15, we are embodied creatures who will live forever in resurrected bodies on a renewed earth. **Physical touch will forever remain a way for us to express love and affection.** It's the way God made us to interact and engage each other. So let's be willing to embody our affection in culturally-appropriate ways.
  
- ❖ Pre-COVID, I used to stand back there after service and shake everyone's hands. Some of you were open to hugs. And I appreciated all of that. Now I know, since the pandemic, some of you are less comfortable with physically touching others. I want to be sensitive to that.
  - So for now, I'm still going to wait for you to extend your hand for a handshake or to reach out for a hug. I think I'm even okay if you initiate a holy kiss on the cheek. But I want to say it right here, right now, don't be shy. **I'm open to receive your expression of brotherly affection.** Even if it's just a polite wave for now. We're the church, so let's make a point of showing our love as a spiritual family.