

1 Corinthians 16:5-18 [NIV]

After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you – for I will be going through Macedonia. ⁶ Perhaps I will stay with you for a while, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go. ⁷ For I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. ⁸ But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹ because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.

¹⁰ When Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am. ¹¹ No one, then, should treat him with contempt. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with the brothers.

¹² Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity.

¹³ Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. ¹⁴ Do everything in love.

¹⁵ You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the Lord's people. I urge you, brothers and sisters, ¹⁶ to submit to such people and to everyone who joins in the work and labors at it.

¹⁷ I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you. ¹⁸ For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such men deserve recognition.

We're in 1 Corinthians today, the 16th chapter.

I don't think I've ever brought a message from this chapter before, and 20 minutes from now, some of you may say that I *still* have not brought a message from this chapter – we'll just have to see.

These past few weeks, we've been looking at these difficult days in which we've lived through the lens of the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, where the writer tells us "*there is a time and a season for everything.*" We've considered these days as times to sing, to fast, to laugh, to cry, and to rest.

And I know that some of those, on their surface, don't seem to go hand in hand with life in difficult days. But we've said that that is the truly beautiful thing about living in Jesus Christ: no matter what's happening in or around the Christ-follower, though the days may well bring times to fast and to cry, the days are also always times to sing and to rest and to laugh – and today, Valentine's Day, to love.

Life in Christ always offers a time to love.

Now, there are many passages in the Bible that speak of love – passages far more familiar, and some might say far more appropriate, than this one for a message on love.

But I chose this one specifically because of its context, because of what was going on in this moment between the Apostle Paul and the church at Corinth, and within the church – the Christians of Corinth.

And, there was plenty going on that was not good: not edifying, not encouraging, not Christ-like.

Which, as Paul realized, is a *great* time to talk about *love*, because it's always *easy* to love our brothers and

sisters in Christ when they make us *feel* like loving them: when they've been *kind* to us, *generous* with us, *helpful* or *encouraging* to us, when they *agree* with us.

But it's a very different thing – and a much harder thing – to love our brothers and sisters in Christ when they *don't* do things that make us feel like loving them: when they've been *short* with us, *stingy* with us, when they've *diminished* or *dismissed* us, when maybe they have *left* us, when they *disagree* with us.

Yet, Jesus calls His followers to love one another regardless of how we *feel toward* each other – regardless of how we've been treated, regardless of whether or not we're in agreement about this or that or the other. As long as we're in agreement about *Jesus*, you see, we're called to love one another.

That is the call of Christ to His people, and to the Corinthian believers in particular, here in this passage.

Corinth was a large, busy sea-port where people and cultures of all kinds mingled together, a complex and colorful place. Paul visited there toward the end of his second missionary journey. He spent 18 months there in fact, and he planted this church. And, as you can imagine, with such a mix of peoples and races, cultures and beliefs and morals, there were lots of differences which at times led to lots of tensions – tensions in the city and, sadly, tensions spilling over into the church.

And this was apparently quite common, if you can believe the New Testament letters.

You think this virus and today's political issues have caused tensions in the American church? We need to understand that the tensions we're experiencing are nothing compared to the tensions that have existed in most churches, in most places, in most ages.

But the American church, in general, is having a huge problem with it, probably because of our homogeneity. The sameness that most of us have experienced all our lives has *dulled us to difference*, so much so that it's hard for most Americans – myself included – to even comprehend the degree of differences that most churches around the world today contend with, and especially churches in cities, like the one we see in Corinth.

I think most of us – *not all* of us, but most of us – don't even realize how much we're used to being surrounded by people who are just like us.

For most American Christians, the luxury of being part of the majority in our country for so long has allowed for this.

And what it has done to us is that it has made us a people who don't know how to handle disagreement healthily.

We're seeing this play out in churches all across our nation today: if one Christian doesn't agree with a brother or sister – sometimes over just one relatively small thing – they just leave and move on to another

group, a group where they can agree on that point, and they'll stay there until something comes up in that place with which they don't agree, and then they'll move on again, and again, and again.

This is why there are often multiple churches of the same denomination, or at least the same theological persuasion, in even very small towns here in the States.

Some have even sanctified this as a church-planting strategy, you know?

It's like the old joke about the guy – we'll make him Baptist just for fun – who was stranded alone on a remote island for 20 years. When rescuers finally got to him, they found he had built three structures.

When they asked him about them, the man pointed to one building and said, "That's my house."

"And so, what's that over there?" the rescuers asked.

"That's my church," the stranded man replied. "I'm Baptist and take my faith very seriously."

"But then, what's that third building?" the rescuers asked.

"Oh," the man said, "That's where I used to go to church before the split."

You see, the Christians at Corinth didn't have the luxury that we have today of simply going down the street to a different fellowship. There was no other fellowship.

It's as I've said before about Christians in Baghdad or Islamabad or Pyongyang or Tehran or other places like that (and there are people right here in this room who've experienced this): when Christians are the minority – when there are only a handful of people around who follow Jesus, what you find is that they don't really care so much about politics or how they dress or whether they're home-schooled or public-schooled or what they believe about end times, or what songs they sing when they get together.

When there is only a relative handful of us, what happens is you realize that if that other person or family knows Jesus, then that's enough for me; we're going to meet together and enjoy each other and encourage each other. We're going to stick together!

If they know the same Jesus that I know, then one way or another we're going to love each other.

Why? Because Jesus has truly become to us *the most important thing*.

If there is a blessing to "minority-ness," this is it: it causes you to honestly determine what's really important.

And, of course, I don't know, but maybe that's what the Lord is doing in the American church in our day: maybe He's trying to reset our priorities. Maybe He's doing some refining, some purifying. And it is not pleasant. Nobody likes it. Nobody chooses it. But it does burn away all that is not really eternally important, and it forces people to make decisions about those most important things of life.

And what is most important to a Christ-follower, besides Jesus Himself, is what Jesus tells us back in John 13:34-35 as He was preparing to go to the cross. He told His disciples, "*I give you a new command – love each other.*"

Since He was talking there to His disciples, He assumed they loved God, which is the greatest command.

Beyond that, Jesus says, here's the bottom line: if you say you love God, then that has to lead to loving the others who love God – to loving each other.

In fact, "*That's the proof of the faith. That's how the people around you will know that you're my disciples,*" Jesus said.

They won't know it by our going to church, not by how much we do or give or know. They won't know it by what we say or preach or pray. How people in the world around us will know that we follow Jesus is by the way we love our brothers and sisters.

Now, what we might think about this or that or the other matters. Sure, it does because there is right and wrong, and Christians have wrong opinions and need to be corrected at times. That's a big part of what Paul is doing in this letter.

How we think about things is important, especially things that are important to God.

But Christians loving one another is what convinces the world of God's reality, and here's why: if a group of people who are different from each other in so many ways can actually genuinely love each other and get along together; if that kind of mercy and grace can prevail within a group of people who are diverse in just about every other way, then God must be in that group of people, because that simply couldn't happen without Him.

That's the logic of it. Every time we brush up against someone in the church with whom we disagree about this or that, yet live in love with them – talk openly with them, seek to understand them – you see, we get the opportunity to prove, to demonstrate, to the world that Jesus is enough and that God is powerful enough to let us love each other, in spite of our differences.

And every time we refuse to do it, we tell the world, "Ah, God isn't really able to make that much of a difference."

You see, it's easy to be right, theologically or doctrinally.

It's easy to do all the things that we think Christians ought to do. It's easy to be a Christian, apart from other Christians.

What is hard sometimes is to be a Christian in the midst of other Christians, which is precisely why love is the proof of God's presence and power.

That's why Christians who will love each other get the world's attention.

And, that's why those who won't love, quite frankly, wind up angry and isolated and mean and miserable.

Now again, I'm not saying to love means to check truth at the door. Love is not the mushy, "anything goes" sort of thing that our world has made it to be. Not at all.

But choosing to love does mean keeping our commitment to our brothers and sisters in Christ – as seriously as we keep any other commitment, beneath our commitment to Jesus.

It is true that love without truth is not God's kind of love.

But it is also true that truth without love is not God's kind of truth.

Christians loving one another get our cancel-culture world's attention, and we all have opportunities every day to send this message; honestly, we probably have more opportunities than we would choose, at times.

And so did the Apostle Paul. He had multiple chances to practice this—more than *he* would have chosen, I suspect, and a fair number of those opportunities came with the Christians at Corinth.

It has been said that everywhere Paul went, there was either a revival or a riot. At Corinth, it started out as revival, but it turned into a riot, at first in the city—Acts 18 tells us about that—and then, eventually and sadly, the riot moved into the church.

By the time of this letter, the church at Corinth was immensely broken. And, of course, since Paul had stayed there quite a long time, he knew the people very well. So, the letter here went to people who Paul would have said were in deep relationship with him—people who trusted him.

This was not like his letter to the Christians at Rome, whom Paul had never met and didn't know. These were people he knew well, and knowing that makes the conflict revealed in the letter even worse, because it was personal.

So much was wrong in the church at Corinth—it had to break Paul's heart.

There was division in the church about which of their teachers was the best. It's at the Corinth church where you get the "I follow Daryl, I follow Dwight, I follow Andrea" sort of thing.

There was division over ethnicity and social status.

Some there were saying that serious sexual immorality of different kinds was no big deal.

Some were bringing lawsuits against each other.

There were wealthier members marginalizing the poorer ones.

Some were insistent upon doing as they pleased—demanding their rights—even though their actions hurt some of the others.

Some were using their Spiritual gifts for their own advantage and not for the good of the body.

And on and on.

These were major spiritual problems, and the letter here is full of corrections that Paul makes to all this that was going on.

But really, if you add it all up and look at it as a whole, the major, underlying problem at Corinth was just an appalling lack of love in the church—for one another and for their leaders, including Paul.

Although this letter lets us know that there were people in the church asking Paul for his counsel about some of these things, in reality, they apparently had very little intention of taking it—which we know because of Second Corinthians.

Yet, as complex as the problems were there, the cure for them all was really very simple. A four-letter word sums it up: *love*.

The absence of love for one another was the root of all of their issues.

When Peter writes, *Love one another, because love covers over a multitude of sins*,¹ that's part of what he means, you see? Love solves lots of problems.

If the believers at Corinth were themselves ever going to be able to be whole...

If they were ever going to repair the damage they had done to each other...

And, if they were ever going to rightly represent Jesus and so make a difference in their city and their world...

They simply had to begin choosing to love one another—not just with their words but with their lives and their decisions and their priorities. This is why, at the end of all of Paul's theological clarification and personal counsel and encouragement and correction in this letter, he says in verse 14 there, "*Do everything in love.*"

Everything you do, do it in love.

And, in case you wonder, the word there is the Greek *agape*, which is the self-giving, self-sacrificial sort of love.

It's not the romantic or even erotic *eros*.

It's not the brotherly *philos*.

It's not the familial *storge*.

It's *agape*. It's the love of God, the love that gives *of* self—and gives *up* self—for the good of others.

It is the love of Jesus.

Now, you might say, "Well, it's easy for somebody like Paul to just demand that since he was sort of out of their loop. He wasn't even in the same town when he told them this."

Ah, but you see, Paul had to practice this very same thing that he's telling those in the church to practice, because some of the attacks of the Corinthian Christians were against him. They wounded him personally.

And it would have been easy for Paul to command love, but then, himself, just stay in Ephesus—350 miles away.

Talk is cheap at that distance.

But that's not what Paul does. He explains right there at the beginning of our text that's he's planning a visit. He wants to come to them: to see them, to sort things out, to re-establish right relationship. Paul is pursuing love with a people who have not loved him in return.

You see, that's what love does. Love doesn't run *from* the tension; love runs *to* the tension, not to make it worse, but to make it right. Love values the relationship. Love keeps the commitment.

That's the priority of love, you see?

Valuing truth, certainly, as Paul very clearly does.

But also valuing relationship—the brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ.

With all of the division and polarization and disagreement that is our nation in these days, if there ever was a time for Christians to practice love, it's now.

If Christians ever needed patience and mercy and grace and kindness from one another, it's now.

¹ 1 Peter 4:8

If the unsaved world around us ever needed to see followers of Christ practicing *agape*—self-giving love—with each another, it's now.

Because, if ever our communities, our nation, our world needed to be—and could be—transformed by love, it's now.

Today is the church's day to shine—but love is the source of our light, and we'll never shine without it.

Do you need a touch from God to help you love someone today?

A brother who has offended you?

A sister who disagrees with you?

Whose face pops into your mind?

One reason God sent His Spirit to His Church is to empower us to do what is impossible to do by human strength alone.

And His Spirit is here right now and offering supernatural power to run toward those who've hurt us, those we think differently from, those we don't understand, those with whom we disagree, and to love them with the love of Jesus.

Do you need the Spirit's help to love someone today?

Closing Song: *They'll Know We Are Christians*

Benediction:

Jesus said, *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another* (John 13:34-35).

In all days, but in these days especially, may the Spirit of Christ help us all to keep the command of Christ: for the witness of the Church, for the salvation of the world, for the glory of God.