

The Personal Touch

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[0 : 00] Deep divisions in the church to sort out here. No complicated sexual tangles to unravel.! No tricky theological issues to deal with.

! No excursions into ontology like there are in chapter 15.! Just greetings.

Most of Paul's letters conclude with some personal greetings, but this one has rather a lot. And in particular we have these last few verses which in Paul's own handwriting, as he tells us, of course normally the letter would have been written down by a scribe of course, but these last few verses are so personal that Paul writes them in his own handwriting.

He doesn't dictate them to the scribe. I've called this the personal touch. You'll notice that Paul singles out Stephanas, who was mentioned in chapter 1, as somebody who had come from Corinth and had refreshed them.

He reminds them to welcome Timothy and talks about Apollos, who of course was also mentioned in chapter 1, and says he'll come when it's convenient.

[1 : 22] There is this command to greet one another with a holy kiss. And what is noticeably missing actually is any greeting from the Jerusalem church, but even so they're not forgotten.

Now as we've gone through this epistle, we've realised that there were so many things that were threatening to rip the Corinthian church apart. And Paul has dealt with all sorts of issues, a whole range of things.

But now he wants to sort of glue it back together, as it were, put it back together. And I think this is why we have so many greetings here, and so much personal touch here.

He wants to emphasise the need for the personal relationships and trust between those who are working for the Lord. You might think in these days of instant communication that we don't need personal communication, but I think Paul's very much saying here that we do.

We all suffer actually rather from information overload nowadays, don't we? But Paul wants to spend time with them. We get news from Christians all over the world, don't we?

[2 : 37] And it's difficult to take it all in. We just can't sort of sympathise with everybody and everywhere all over the world when we hear news. We're just not capable of doing it.

The spirit might be willing, but the flesh is weak. We just send emails instantly, and they arrive instantly and so instantly forgotten.

Anyway, all I want to do really is just look through some of the points, issues that Paul makes in this chapter. As I say, you can be relaxed about it. It's nothing very challenging intellectually or even morally in one sense, although there's certainly some things he has to say about the way we should behave.

But it's good news, really. It's the things he wants to remind us, the things that will glue the church together and keep it as a family, a place where it's good to come, rather than turning up on the doorstep and wondering what's going to be said.

How are we going to be upset when we turn up? What's going to stick the church together? And I'll deal with these points just more or less in the order that Paul does.

[3 : 52] I'll jump backwards and forwards a bit, but I thought I'd more or less stick to the order that Paul introduces these things. And the first thing you can see he talks about in the beginning of chapter 16, verses 1 to 4, is the collection for God's people.

I put on the slide there a reminder from James' epistle. I suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food, and if one of you says to him, go, I wish you well, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. The target, as we say, for this gift is, as we can see in verse 3, is Jerusalem.

And we don't exactly know what the problem was in Jerusalem, but we can certainly glean some hints, both from the secular history of the place, but also from Acts. It's interesting, actually, Paul went to Jerusalem in Acts 15 from the council of Jerusalem when they met to discuss the issue of circumcision and what the parts of the law the Gentile believers had to keep.

And when he got there, we were told they were greeted by the apostles and elders. Peter got up and spoke, and James the elder, not James the apostle, James the elder, wrote the sort of conference report at the end.

[5 : 25] Fast forward to Acts 21, and you find that Paul goes again to Jerusalem, but it's very different. There's no reference to the apostles at all.

It just says James and the elders greeted him. Where were Peter and John and the other apostles? Apparently, they'd left the city. Can't be sure exactly where they were, but there's certainly no reference to them.

James the elder was still there. And what happened when Paul, in Jerusalem in Acts 21, in many ways, he got a very different reception.

The church sort of went into panic mode and said, you've got to make Paul jump through all these political hoops going and fulfilling vows at the temple and all that sort of thing to try and pacify the Jews.

And did it work? No. The result was a riot and the Romans had to intervene to restore order. So in that period, there seems to have been a downhill.

[6 : 28] Things are going downhill in Jerusalem. We don't know exactly where, in that period, the Corinthians letter fits, but certainly things were going downhill and building up towards the destruction of Jerusalem, which happened in AD 70.

And we know from secular historians that there was complete chaos in the city by AD 70. The Romans had pretty well lost, well, they had lost control of the city.

It was basically under the rule of a lot of warlords, pretty much like Syria and Afghanistan seem to be so much today. So we don't know exactly what the state was in things in Jerusalem, but we can probably infer it was in a pretty bad way, partly because Paul thought it was essential to organise a collection among all the Gentile churches and partly because, as I say, there is noticeably absent of any greeting from Jerusalem itself.

It was presumably getting difficult to get information in and out of the city. We see there's probably a slight reluctance, we see there, of Paul to take the gift as well.

He says he will if I have to, more or less. He says in verse 4, if it's really advisable for me to go, I'll go, but it might be better if I didn't. I'm too well known, I think is what Paul's saying.

[7 : 57] A delegation of not so well known might be able to slip in unobserved, but if I go, people are going to notice, I think is perhaps what he's getting at there. So, Jerusalem is in a bad way.

The Gentile churches might have been saying, well, it serves them right, it's not our problem. But no, it was their problem. They were the concern for the problems of the people of God, even though they were mostly Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

Most of the churches outside Jerusalem were Gentiles, dominated by Gentile believers. But they were all the people of God, the people of Christ.

and that they were concerned for them, for the benefit and good and for their practical well-being, not just their spiritual well-being, but their practical well-being.

And I think that James reminds us of that, doesn't he, in that verse I quoted that's up on the screen there. It's no good just saying, you know, go well, keep warm and be well-fed.

[9 : 05] Bless you, brother. May the Lord be with you if you actually don't do anything about it. And so, the first thing that Paul's reminding us in this chapter is that we do have a responsibility to care, both materially and spiritually, for the people of God.

It says elsewhere, do good to all men, but particularly the house of God. We should be concerned when we hear of problems believers are having in other places and if we can do anything practical, we should try and do so.

And if we can't, we can at least pray for them and be concerned and remember them. It's also interesting that the word gift in verse 3, send them with your gift to Jerusalem, is actually the word charis, the same word for gifts of spirit that was causing so much trouble in the Corinthian church. He says, well, you want gifts, here's a gift you can give to the people in Jerusalem. And the same word is actually translated grace in verse 23. That's also the Greek word charis, the same word.

So, they want gifts, they should be sending gifts to the people in Jerusalem, to the believers who were in need. So, that's the first thing that Paul wants to emphasize, is that we need to be concerned for the well-being of the people of God.

[10:36] And a second point he makes here, I think, is that building relationships takes time. He says, I don't want to make a flying visit.

I mean, he's just written this enormous long letter. You would have thought he would have run out of things to say to them, wouldn't you? But, no, he wants to see them personally.

And he doesn't just want to make a flying visit either. So, they don't want to see you now and make only a passing visit. I hope to spend some time with you if the Lord permits. He says, I'm hoping even to be able to spend the whole winter there in Achaia if I can.

He thinks perhaps that a flying visit might actually do more harm than good. It might, you know, he'd talk to the people who are sort of pro-Paul and other people and say, oh, he didn't talk to me and, you know, he's not concerned with me and rushed off.

And, he needs time, doesn't he, to build relationships. And I don't think you can build relationships over the internet or even by letters. You need relationships have to be built face to face.

[11:51] We communicate with each other in all sorts of ways, don't we? We, by our body language and our facial expressions as well as by what we say. That's why there's all this row over Muslim women not being able to wear veils in court because we do communicate by what we say, by our face and our body language as well.

And we need to spend time sort of discussing things, you know, over the hot chocolate to a glass of brandy in the evening and sit down and have discussions.

You need to get up and wander around and, you know, stare at the moon while you think of what to say and then come back and continue the conversation. We need to eat together. Paul's made this point earlier, hasn't he?

the importance of people eating together. Humans have fellowship by eating together and when they eat together they share not just food but their ideas and their conversation as well.

And they, well, yeah, they need to spend time. It takes time. Relationships take time to build and we have to make space for them. And I think Paul is very keen to make that point.

[13:13] And yet, at the same time, we, if you might say, the Corinthians, perhaps need to be a bit understanding about this. Look at verses 8 and 9.

He says, a great door for effective workers opened for me in Ephesus. And, you know, I've got to concentrate on that.

Or in verse 12, it makes a policy on a bit rude here. I urge him to go to you, go with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now but he will go when he has the opportunity.

I don't think the Greek is quite intended or a Greek scholar but I looked up a couple of words. I don't think he's quite intended to give that slightly brusque impression. I think what he was saying that Apollos also is just unable to come at the moment.

He has too many other commitments that he has to deal with. But he's hoping to get there as soon as he can. And I think there is an issue here that we need to be understanding.

[14:24] Paul's delay in coming was not because he thought the Corinthians were unimportant. Apollos we know spent even more time in Corinth than Paul had. He was very concerned for them but he was unable to go at present.

There were always pressures on the time of gospel workers. And I think we need to be careful that we don't let our own concerns blind us to the importance of opportunities elsewhere.

and I think that even applies amongst our fellowship. We kind of, as Tim was reminding us on Friday, we're very self-centered, we live in a very self-centered society.

And we kind of think, well we pay our pastors to look after us, to look after our spiritual needs. And of course to some extent that's true, I think it's reasonable to expect the shepherds to look after the sheep.

But we have to be careful I think that we're not too demanding. We don't put such a burden on our spiritual leaders that they're unable to deal, take opportunities elsewhere.

[15:34] They don't spend all their time as we might say sort of firefighting but rather can have the opportunity to preach the gospel outside and outwards as well as just dealing with our individual spiritual problems.

I think there's a need for a balance here. It is right I think that we should expect and want our spiritual leaders to give us advice and to be concerned for us when we need it. But still we should try and avoid, not think everything revolves around us and if we don't get a visit from Phil or Chris every week then we're not getting our money's worth sort of thing. I don't think we should be expecting that. We shouldn't be putting such a burden on our leaders. We need to understand that they're there to minister the word of God and to proclaim the word of God and they should be given opportunity to do that. Even though as I say it is right that if we have spiritual problems we should be able to ask them for advice. But still we need to keep a sense of proportion and understand that they do have other concerns and not get the huff if they don't answer us immediately when we send them a text message.

[16:56] The next point I think he makes is the importance of personal recommendation. That's quite important. You notice that in verses 3 and 4 he says I want to take some people when you take your gift to Jerusalem I don't just want you to send it by post or do a money transfer.

I want you to go personally with it and I will certainly know who you are. I will give you a letter of recommendation and he says very much the same thing about Timothy doesn't he in verses 10 and 11.

If 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. I am no one then should refuse to accept him. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with a brother. So Paul is saying Timothy is a good man. When he comes you have got to welcome him. I am personally recommending him. And I think that's actually right. We are not supposed to be credulous. In verse 13 he does say be on your guard.

[18:16] Well guard against what? Well there might be some who come along who claim to be bringing the word of God but actually are not. And of course in sense we can sort of ask you know try and work out by their fruits and by what they say but it may be a bit late by then.

It's better really if we can have a letter from somebody we trust from somebody in another church who would write to us and say yeah this is a good guy you want to really welcome him.

He's really worth listening to or he'll really help you when he comes. And similarly when we send people elsewhere or when our members move on as Adam and Rachel have just done it's right I think that we I gather Phil went personally and pretty much said that we recommend these guys they will really be an asset to your church welcome them because they'll really help you out. And I think that's the right thing to do and we perhaps should bear it in mind when we're seeking new people to come we should if possible try and get recommendations from people who know them and again when people move on from us we should be recommending them also because that will stop the wolves in sheep's clothing sneaking into the church.

If we don't want the church to be blown apart or we want it to be unified we have to be on our guard we have to protect the perimeter we have to make sure that we're not letting things in which shouldn't be getting in.

[19:55] And a good way to do that is to work by personal recommendation from people that we trust. So I think that's quite an important point this idea of recommendation sending a letter or recommending personally is quite an important thing to bear in mind as people move around between churches.

And in sense the other side of that we find in verses 17 and 18 I was glad says Paul when Stephanus Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived because they supplied what was lacking from you. They refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such men deserve recognition. Paul had heard bad things from Chloe's household. He was clearly worried.

But then Stephanus turned up. with his friends or we don't know who they are. It says his household perhaps they were his sons or something we don't know. But members of his household perhaps or his friends had turned up from Corinth and Paul was encouraged and relieved.

Things perhaps weren't as bad as I'd heard. I could talk with Stephanus and find out what was really going on and know that there clearly are problems and yet it is clear that there are still godly men in the church at Corinth.

[21:23] And they refreshed my soul. And he says they refreshed yours. I'm not quite sure how they did that. Whether it was when they went back again or whether he meant simply that by saying I'm going to go to Paul and sort things out with him and make sure he understands what's going on

and I'm going to go and support him.

Perhaps he refreshed their souls in that way. I don't know. but the personal visit, the personal contact was a great encouragement. We have this sort of thing that evangelicals do particularly of these missionary visits don't we?

And people come round, it's called deputation work they call it, don't they? The missionaries come back to the UK for a rest and we make them drive all over the country visiting and talking to people. But yeah, I mean it is good. It refreshes ourselves doesn't it when Michael Steedman or James from Albania or somewhere comes or somebody from Sri Lanka comes.

People, we get the letters, we get the news from them but it refreshes ourselves when they come in person and we can talk to them and really see what's happening and talk to them face to face and it is refreshing and encouraging to have a personal contact.

[22 : 44] It's a particular encouragement I think. Finally, well not quite finally but Paul reminds us to do everything in love.

He's already spent a lot of time of course telling us that in chapter 13 but building love between God's people. is surely what all this chapter is about.

And so he mentions all these different people. I was interested, I wonder what the word warmly in verse, I said verse 9 but I mean verse 19 don't I? Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord. I looked up and the word isn't really warmly, it means, it actually means large or bigger. so we could think of it as something like saying a big hug from Aquila and Priscilla.

they want to send love, they can't perhaps send anything else particularly but they want to know, they want the Corinthians to know that they're loved and there's a concern from them and they greet you warmly as does the church that meets at their house.

[24 : 04] They face similar problems this church no doubt, they have common interests and they want to express that in terms of love, that's building relationships in this case between two different churches but still expressing the love that is the real foundation of unity.

You can't really have unity without love. Well, you can't have unity, you can't have unity without love. It's love really that binds the church together that other things are threatening to push it apart but if we love one another and if we have that sort of patient love that Paul talks about in chapter 13 then well then we then the church will remain together and if there are problems love will be able to overcome them, work them through and sort them out.

And then finally Paul writes this last greeting from verse 21 in his own fair hand.

Probably not very fair, we didn't have word processes in those days but if you've ever seen my writing you'll know why I type everything. The professional scribes they had of course to write these letters and Paul would have dictated it and it would have been taken down.

But Paul wants this message to be so personal that he says I'm going to write it in my own handwriting. I hope you can read it but I'll try and write as neat as I can and I'm going to write it in my own hand.

[25 : 50] And it is very personal. I haven't changed the slide over. It's a personal blessing or indeed perhaps even a personal curse. There's actually a kind of bilingual word play going on here.

The word for curse is anathema. The Greek word is anathema. Which means something like being set aside for destruction. Being, well it means a curse but yes a curse that brings total destruction on that person who receives the anathema.

That's what the Greek word, that's a Greek word but the second half is not Greek at all actually it's Aramaic. It's as it says in your footnote probably it's Maranatha as we often pronounce it.

And that means something like the Lord will come or come Lord or the Lord is coming. two words that sound very much alike anathema Maranatha it's probably a deliberate word play but they may sound very much alike but they mean opposite very opposite things.

Those who don't love the Lord will certainly not want to say Maranatha come Lord they will find his coming as nothing but destruction.

[27 : 26] and Paul says I've got to warn you of that I'll curse you but it is a warning you know this is what will happen you will find when the Lord comes that the result will be destruction so if anyone does not love the Lord a curse beyond him but come oh Lord those of you who can say come oh Lord Maranatha will be those who will welcome his coming when he does come and then finally he says the grace of the Lord Jesus be with you my love to all of you in Christ Jesus amen so after all the ups and downs after all the harsh words sometimes we have this sort of warm cuddly ending

and I think it's good but there's a lot in it nonetheless it's not just sort of warm and cuddly with nothing to say there's a lot of things he has to say to the Corinthians and he has to say to us in this last chapter so I'll just let me just read them out again what there is there there's concern for the well-being of God's people we need to be concerned for the well-being of all

God's people we need to be interested in building relationships and that takes time we need to spend time with people we rush about so much don't we well Paul I think would have understood that he was always rushing about but he needs to realise the need to spend time with people and we need to be understanding that there are other demands on people's times we shouldn't be so demanding of people that they can't do anything else that they can't say particularly perhaps the leaders in the church should have opportunity to study the word and to proclaim the word and we shouldn't be so demanding of their time that they don't have opportunity to do that he reminded us of the importance of personal recommendation because we do have to be on our guard there will be those who will try and get in and try and wreck things and if we're not guarded if we're not careful then we'll let them in before we've realised they can you know the scripture talks about sheep in wolves clothes sorry wolf in sheep's clothing sorry people who look harmless but aren't talks even about the devil appearing as an angel of light his name is one of his names is Lucifer isn't it the bright one and yet he only wants to get in to cause damage and division and lies so we need to be careful and a good way to be careful is to get recommendations from those whom we trust and say to pass on recommendations to other people of those who we trust to go out from us and of course I suppose implicit in that is the idea that we need to trust other churches so we need to be concerned need to know about other churches know where they stand and you know do we really trust what they say to us because you know there were some groupings who Paul would have said even if they send you a letter I'd ignore it don't you know don't trust them so we do need to know where other churches are coming from do they really love the Lord and if so then we will trust what they have to say to us personal recommendation is important and personal contact gives a particular encouragement we should use opportunities to have personal contact with one another here but also perhaps with believers elsewhere if we can in order to encourage one another and we should do everything in love go back and read 1 Corinthians 13 again tells you all the details as to how you do it but love is patient love is kind long suffering doesn't keep a record of wrongs all the other things that Paul says and then we have this very personal greeting and perhaps well he says do the same thing doesn't he in verse 20 he says greet one another with a holy kiss I don't know if it's very British to go around kissing people but they do it of course in other cultures but we certainly should be greeting one another with a spiritual kiss at least with a sign of love and of affection for one another and Paul has this affection for the Corinthians and sends this blessing to them and even though it's a blessing that always comes also with a warning be careful do you really love the Lord I'm showing you my love on the basis that I believe that you love the Lord but you know it could also show that you don't so be careful so perhaps a warm cuddly ending in one sense but one that I think has a lot to say to us and we can learn from it and remember the lessons that it has so let's sing what else