

Serving the Servants

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[0 : 00] So we've been going through 1 Corinthians here in the evening service for the most part. That's what has been dealt with. And Colin labored this series as imperfect church, perfect Savior.

Imperfect church, imperfect Savior. And if you've been here or if you've been listening online, we certainly have heard an encyclopedia of imperfections in the Corinthian church.

Pride, strife, arrogance, indifference, irreverence, factionalism, classism, quarreling, boasting, accusing, jealousy, idolatry, gluttony, false piety, sexual immorality, unkindness, callousness, drunkenness, spiritual abuse, spiritual pride, making others stumble, lack of submission, heresy, a denial of the resurrection, therefore a denial of the gospel.

I suppose murder is missing from the list. But if we consider Jesus' teaching, the one who considers someone else a fool, the spirit of which is behind any number of the sins that I've noted, then that one is as good as a murderer.

So we might as well throw that one in too. Imperfect church, I should say so. And we can see why Paul, as he closes out this letter, offers the imperatives that he does.

[1 : 27] There are five of them. Be watchful. Stand firm in the faith. Act like men. Be strong. Let all that you do be done in love. Be watchful.

Stand firm in the faith. Act like men. Be courageous. Be strong. Let all that you do be done in love. Now it makes sense, as one commentator says, to see the commands given here in the light of Corinthians' wrong attitudes to gospel ministry.

They're called upon to be watchful, to be on guard. They clearly have succumbed to the secular ways of thinking about people like Apollos and Paul. Stand firm in the faith of Christ.

Crucified was as much in need by the Corinthians as any. And the call to act like men, to be courageous, to be people of courage, to be strong, involves resisting pressure to mold the ministry according to the secular categories of polished and slick oratory.

And the call to do everything in love may well be a rebuke to their divisiveness. These imperatives, coming where they do in this letter, I think is not without purpose.

[2 : 35] For should the church in Corinth take to heart these imperatives in the light of all the ways that they have been behaving badly, it will cause them to be transformed from an unhealthy church to a healthy one.

And given Paul's instructions that surround these five imperatives, they need to be a healthy church. Now, if we look at verses 5 through 10 of here of chapter 16, we'll see that there's an expectation on the part of Paul for the Corinthian church to do its part in serving the mission of God by serving the servants of God.

5 through 9, Paul's writing, I'll come and visit you after passing through Macedonia. I intend to pass through Macedonia. Perhaps I'll stay with you or even spend the winter so that you may help me on my journey wherever I go.

And then later, when he's writing about Timothy next, he said, When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord as I am, so that no one despises him.

Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I'm expecting him with the brothers. Paul, we read, encouraged Apollos to visit them, but he appears to have a full calendar and will come when he has the opportunity.

[4 : 00] Now, a similar expectation that they would be helpful towards those who are serving the purposes of God, a similar expectation was before at the beginning of this chapter, which we didn't read here tonight.

Verses 1 through 4, Concerning a collection for the saints as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside, store it up, that he may prosper, as he may prosper, excuse me, so that there will be no collecting when I come.

And when I arrive, I'll send those whom you accredited by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable, I'll go also and they will accompany me. And in this situation, it seems that Paul has already communicated to the Corinthians about this project that he has of gathering money for the saints in Jerusalem.

So they had asked for more information, perhaps in the letter that they sent, but Paul proceeds to give them directions. So we can hear from verses 1 through 4, or from 5 through 10, that Paul is expecting the church in Corinth to be engaged, not just with their own affairs, but also the affairs of the church, the capital C church, the capital B body of Christ.

I think if we go back to chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians, where Paul likens a church to a human body, I think it sheds some light on what he is teaching here.

[5 : 33] Now back then, when we looked at that, we noted that there are, he talks about that there are a variety of gifts, but it's the same Spirit who gives them. There are varieties of service, but the same Lord.

And there are varieties of activities, and it's the same God who empowers them all and everyone. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit who apportions to each one individually as he will. So in the local church, we can expect a diversity of gifts that, when added together, equip and empower that church to carry out its work.

Then he appears to broaden this principle of diversity by referring not just to a variety of gifts, but the diversity of people, backgrounds, ethnicity, status.

For just as the body is one and has many members, he writes, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit, we are all baptized into one body. Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and are all made to drink of the one Spirit. So, with that, we can expect that that will be the nature of a local church.

[6 : 43] That there will be people coming from various backgrounds. That the reason we're all in here is because of Christ calling each one of us into this. It doesn't make any difference whether you're a Jew or a Gentile, slave or free, or whatever the equivalents might be.

The fact that what binds us together here is not that we all like the same football team, we all like the same movies, we all like the same books, we all like the same food, but it's because we all know Christ.

That's why we're here. So, just as there is a diversity of gifts within the local church, we can expect that there's a diversity of people within the local church. But I think, verse 12, that one, for just as the body is one as many members, and all the members of the body, though many are one body, so it is with Christ, I think we can also understand that verse as describing the body of Christ, the capital B body of Christ, the universal church.

If that's a legitimate extension of the idea, then what he goes on to say relates not just to how we are connected to within the local body of Christ, but also how we are related to the capital B body of Christ.

Listen to what he says back in chapter 12. God has so composed the body that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

[8 : 17] If one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honored, all rejoice together. And now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. See, I think Paul is writing to a local particular church, trying to get them to see that they need one another.

That is how God has designed the church. Like a human body, every person, every member is related to one another, caring for one another, contributing what God has given them to contribute. And it's what allows for the body to be strong, to be healthy. But I think that analogy is applicable also to the instructions Paul gives to the Corinthian church as he closes out his letter.

See, each individual church can be called the body of Christ, but it's also the case that the entire church, the church with a capital C, churches throughout the centuries, churches that span the globe, churches from every tongue, tribe, and nation, they all compose the body of Christ.

So therefore, we're not just related to each other in this church with the attendant obligations. We are also related to the universal church, the capital C church, and its obligations.

[9 : 31] See, we here, in Crow Road Free Church, here in Glasgow, we are the body of Christ. But this church is also a member of the body of Christ.

And just as each individual body of Christ has within it members who are to do what God has gifted them to do in order that that local body might be healthy and accomplish what God desires, so we too, as a church, have a particular role in the capital C church, the capital B body.

Now, I think this translation, that idea that we belong to each other within that local church, but also the local church belongs to the larger body of Christ.

And I think what Paul then is asking in chapter 16 is that the Corinthian church would understand that about their existence. That they're all just so self-centered, self-involved.

But he's asking them to recognize that they have a role to play, a part to play, in the greater mission that God has for the capital C church. And I think this asks two things of them.

[10 : 41] One, that they be ready, they be prepared, they be ready to help men like Paul and Timothy and Apollos, laborers and fellow workers, as well as other churches, such as the collection that's being taken from the saints in Jerusalem.

So one, that they're ready to help. But also, that they diligently play the part that God has for them to play in the big B body of Christ. See, as we've learned from these lessons, from these sermons, Corinth was very well situated, this church in Corinth was very well situated to play an important part in the greater mission of the church.

It's been noted how important Corinth as a city was in terms of its location, its influence of the culture at the time. And here was a group of believers at a church at the crossroads of trade routes, a destination place for people from one place, moving from one place to another.

And for it, that local church, to play its part well, to be useful in the greater work of the kingdom being carried out by the capital B body of Christ, it needs to be a healthy church.

Dealing with its divisions, holding fast to the gospel that's been preached to them, able to withstand the pressures of competing worldviews, poised, ready to serve the kingdom of God.

[12 : 01] But as it stands now, they're weak, they're undiscerning, lacking conviction, they're not healthy. At the end of the letter, at the end of this letter, I found it interesting that Paul needed to go to such length to explain instructions for how these people who would be visiting were to be treated.

See, at the end of his letters to individuals or to churches, Paul often gives greetings to people. Sometimes he recounts the good works that some have done. He very often offers greetings from various people that are with him.

Other times, he's asked to be remembered to people in the church that he's writing to on several occasions. He offers a final stern warning about what he's addressed in the letter. But only in two other occasions in his letters are there the kind of explicit directives as to how they should treat people who are visiting their city.

And they're very brief compared to what we see in 1 Corinthians. In Romans 16, he says, I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Santeria, that you may welcome her and the Lord in a way that's worthy of the saints and help her in whatever she may need from you. She has been a patron of many and of myself. And at the end of Titus, he instructs him, do your best to speed Zenos, the lawyer, and Apollos on their way. See that they lack nothing. But in 1 Corinthians, it ends with instruction about how they will have the opportunity to help Paul.

[13 : 36] He wants to come. He's going to come. He's going to stop by. He'd like to spend a lot of time with them. But he says, perhaps I'll stay with you or even spend the winter so that you may help me on my journey wherever I go.

And then, Timothy, he's very, very careful with his instruction about how they are to receive Timothy. I don't know the back story for all that. I don't know why.

But listen again. When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord as I am. 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.

Now it might be that they don't know Timothy at all. It might be that Paul understands Timothy's character is just a little uncomfortable when he's in a situation that he doesn't know people. But Paul takes that into account and he spells it out for the church in Corinth.

And I think given their bad behavior, their self-involvement, their lack of love for each other, does he feel the need to instruct them, to coach them on matters that they should be ready to do without being directed?

[14:46] Frankly, I think he lacks confidence in them. And if that's the case, that's a terrible indictment to the church. The church had a lot of things that were out of order.

And as a result, they were a weak part of the body of Christ. That's why he challenges them to be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong, let all that you do be done in love.

You know, the free church has a mission, has a vision for seeing a healthy gospel church in every community in Scotland. A healthy gospel church in every community in Scotland.

And I've heard it explained that it doesn't mean that there needs to be a free church in every community, but a church that is faithful to the gospel in every community in Scotland. Now, that suggests to me a vision that sees the capital B body of Christ as having members, a diversity of members, and the desire of the free church is to do its part in what God is doing through his body in Scotland.

Yeah? It takes into account how God can supply in different places, different members of the body, and what they want to do is cooperate, work with one another.

[16:01] That's a healthy vision. And here, Crow Road. At Crow Road, I've learned since I've been here of a long-standing support of missionaries, that there is a sense in which there is an obligation on the part of this church to serve the greater work of Christ by supporting missionaries who serve in other places that, you know, you and I can't go to.

And there are two church plants going on. The whole idea, again, that there's resources here that can go to other parts of Glasgow in order to make the gospel known. We're doing our part.

And frankly, what Jonathan was talking about earlier, the church refit, the church redo in order to reach this community. That's like the Corinthian church being sure that they themselves are healthy so they can be used well.

See, a church in Bangladesh is not going to reach this community. A church in Johannesburg is not going to reach this community. That's our calling.

That's our task. And for the health of the capital B body of Christ, we need to do what we've been called to do in this part of the world. Now, it might be that God would cause other members of the capital B body to aid us in preparing our property to carry out the calling that we have and frankly, we should not shy away from that.

[17:28] If 1 Corinthians 16, 1 through 4 is any measure, we should accept that we might well receive that kind of support from fellow churches. I'm happy to report that at Helensburg Community Church, one of the church plants of the free church, excuse me, a Crow Road free church, has just received a commitment from a partner church in the United States of giving a thousand pounds a month for six months in order to help that church meet its financial target while they try to increase their own giving within.

That's a really biblical thing to do. That's someone with a vision for the body of Christ that wants to see a church in a whole other community prosper because that's the part that they need to play. That church in South Carolina is not going to make it to Helensburg to do their work. What they need is a local church and so they want to support that one. See, each of us, each church, which is a body of Christ, part of the bigger body of Christ, just like the various members of the human body that does its part to do what it can do, we too, as this particular church within the greater body of Christ, have a task to do.

There's something that we need to do and we want to be faithful to do it. And so, as we consider, for instance, this building project, I know it sounds so sort of materialistic, but it's a spiritual enterprise. It's something where this building becomes even more useful than it has been. It becomes something that right here in this community becomes an asset. It becomes a light. It becomes a resource for people in this community.

[19:04] And they see a group of people, of Christians, who are healthy with one another, they love one another, and they're generous. They're generous with their time, they're generous with their space, they're generous with their money, and then we're doing our part.

We're playing our part. Now again, we might get some help from a couple of churches in America, we might get some help from a couple of Christian foundations to help us meet that goal, but the point of the goal is that we might represent and do our part in the capital B body of Christ that we've been given to do, and when we do that, the whole body of Christ worldwide is that much healthier. because Paul says, you know, if that one part is not healthy, then everything is affected. I mean, you know your own body, right?

If you twist your ankle, your whole life becomes about a sore ankle, right? Everything gets reduced down to just what's going on down there at the bottom of your leg. But when you're healthy, you're free to be able to serve, to do other things.

Life is not controlled by that which is less than what it should be. So in a similar fashion, I would say that as we think about our relationship within, among ourselves, we want to recognize the diversity of gifts.

[20 : 21] We want to recognize the diversity of people, the diversity of backgrounds, and that we care for one another, love one another, and see that each person is adding something to that. And that means that we're a healthy church then. We're healthy because we know we're supposed to care for one another and love one another.

But we also want to recognize that greater responsibility we have for the greater work that God is doing, such as supporting missionaries, doing church plants, and frankly, building up this particular property.

Now, one of the last things that Paul does in this letter, and again, I think it's done deliberately at this point, is to commend several people in the Corinthian church.

He says this in verses 15 to 16. 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.

Be subject to such as these and to every fellow worker and laborer. Stephanas and his household have set themselves apart for the service of the saints.

[21 : 28] That's what that language is. They have devoted themselves. Just like the furniture in the temple is devoted to that particular task. It's like it's been set aside for that task, and that's really what the underlying understanding of this is.

They've given themselves to this. They've said, this is a need, and so we are going to, as a family, as this household, we are going to serve the needs of the saints. Now, it might be that when he says be subject to some of these, that maybe they hold offices within the church, but I don't think that's what he's talking about.

I mean, it's a whole household. What he's really saying, rather, is that they become examples to them. Yeah? That they become examples. That they should follow them in their service of others. Be subject to such as those who are ready to serve, who are ready to be generous, ready to give. And when we have such within our own midst, in our own local church, when there are those who just, you know, they just seem ready to serve, those are the kind of people we want to watch and emulate.

That those are the ones who just, you know, they don't have to be asked. They just come forward and they do it. And that's, you know, part of that is temperament, part of that is gifting, but it's to be emulated.

[22 : 45] It's to see, be subject to those. Paul is saying, listen, those are the kinds of people that you want to put yourself into their care and they're going to help you to learn how you yourself can serve the saints.

So, if the Corinthian church were to do that, yeah? That is, if they would actually look upon someone like Stephanas in that household and be subject to them, come underneath that kind of, that kind of example, that kind of living, what a big step towards health that would be if that kind of commitment to the local body and by extension to the capital B body marked the Corinthian church. It would move from being this absolutely chaotic wild west entity to something that is stable, loving, generous, a presence in a very important city at a very important time so that Christ might be known.

So, I think as Paul closes out this letter and, you know, he remains very kind toward these people despite the fact that he could have a lot, well, he does, he has a lot to complain about, but he still loves them.

He still loves them. I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. If anyone has no love for the Lord, let it be accursed. Our Lord come. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

[24 : 09] My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Despite all of the challenges that they presented, all the ways in which he's had to redirect their thinking, rebuke them, upbraid them, nonetheless, he loves them.

It is an imperfect church, but that church, as imperfect as it is, has a perfect Savior. And that's the Savior that Paul knows, and that's the Savior who gives him the grace, the ability to continue to love this church, this failing, weak, stumbling church, hoping, encouraging, prodding that they might be all that they're called to be by God, that they might do their part in all that God is doing in the world. May God grant us grace to hear what Paul is encouraging us, and that as a church, to be grateful for how it is that we have indeed done our part, but also to see that there's more yet to do, more yet to do.

It requires faith, it requires confidence in what God will do, but we follow his lead, and we can always be confident that he will carry us. Yeah?