

1 Corinthians 16:12-24

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- [0 : 0 0] While the ushers are finishing taking up the offering, if you're new, let me just say welcome. If you're back, it's great to see you. Welcome back.
- This morning we are looking at 1 Corinthians chapter 16, verses 13 through 24. That's page 962 in the Pew Bible. Go ahead and turn there with me.
- In your own Bible or you can turn there in the Pew Bible. 1 Corinthians 16, verses 13 through 24, page 962.
- All right, let me read our text for us. Be watchful. Stand firm in the faith. Act like men. Be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.
- Now I urge you, brothers, you know that the household of Stephanus 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 every fellow worker and laborer.
- [1 : 1 9] I rejoice at the coming of Stephanus and Fortunatus and Achaicus because they have made up for your absence, for they have refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people.
- The churches of Achaia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. All the brothers send you greetings.
- Greet one another with a holy kiss. I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come.
- The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen. Let's pray together. God, we're so thankful for the ways in which you're at work in our city.
- God, we thank you for the mentoring program and for the men and women who make that up and for the families and for the children who are a part of it. God, we just want to pray again for your blessing upon that ministry.
- [2 : 1 9] God, we pray that that would be an expression of the love of Christ for our city. God, would you stir our hearts now as we come to your word, as we come to the end of this great book of 1 Corinthians.
- God, would you open our hearts to hear this final exhortation that you have for us in this book. God, would you come and would you be present by your spirit.
- Lord, help us to hear and in hearing, to grow in our trust and love of you and so be changed for your glory.
- We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, here we are. We've come to the end of our series in 1 Corinthians.
- 1 Corinthians. How many of you were here last September when we began our journey through this book? Okay. We lost half the church during that time, but more people came back.
- [3 : 1 8] Good. Well, here we are. We've come to the end and we've come to Paul's last word. What is the one thing that we should have ringing in our ears and stirring our hearts as we come to the end?

And I think verse 14 really sums up the main thrust of Paul's conclusion. Let all that you do be done in love. And, you know, as I've been reflecting on that verse and as I've been sort of talking about it with Matt and Greg during the week, I mean, hasn't that been the underlying theme for this whole book?

If you turn back all the way to chapter 1, to Paul's intro in the book, verses 1 through 9 of chapter 1, you'll notice that as he's greeting this church in his customary way and as he's giving thanks to God for his work in their midst, there's one thing in that greeting that's noticeably absent.

In most of the letters that we have from Paul, he begins by thanking God, among other things, for the love that that church has for one another and for all the saints. And yet here in 1 Corinthians, the silence is, as it were, deafening.

Paul can thank God for their gifts as he opens this letter, but it seems at that point he cannot thank God for their love. And hasn't that absence of love been at the root of nearly all the troubles this church was in?

[4 : 48] We've seen kind of week in and week out that Corinth was a church that had a lot of issues. As they were torn apart over issues of unity and holiness and worship, under it all, it seems, was a failure of love.

John Chrysostom, the fourth century church father, put it this way, reflecting on verse 14 of our text, and he really summarizes the main issues of the book. He says, There's chapters 8 through 11.

And they would not have boasted about their spiritual gifts. There's chapters 12 through 14. It all, it seems, comes down to love. If love had been present.

But isn't that true for us in the church today? It's easy to look at a church like Corinth and think, Wow, they were really messed up. I'm glad we're not like them. And yet, amidst all our activity, it's easy for love to be absent.

And you know, if there's one thing that we've learned in 1 Corinthians, it's that love is never just absent. It's always replaced by something else.

[6 : 19] Instead of doing all that we do in love, we let something else drive us and something else define us.

Again, think back over this journey that we've been on in 1 Corinthians. When they were torn apart by factions, they had replaced love with eloquence.

A desire for worldly showy wisdom. And when they despised the weak and ate meat sacrificed to idols, they had replaced love with a concern for their rights.

And when their worship services had descended into unedifying chaos, love had been replaced with their gifts. But how about us?

How do we replace love today? Sometimes I think it's our overriding desire to look good. To win approval.

[7 : 22] To be thought well of. And so the church becomes a group of people where everyone hides everything and puts on a show and tries to look good.

But the result is that we never really change. Because it's not the real us who shows up on Sundays. It's the, you know, my own best projection of myself. It's a sort of holy hologram that I put out for everybody to see.

Instead of my own real honest heart that needs help and needs change. Or maybe in our midst we replace love with a desire to have control and to run things our own way.

And so the church as a whole or the ministries that we're involved in end up being not embassies for the Lord Jesus, but they end up being our own little personal fiefdoms. My own little kingdom where I call the shots and trample on everyone else.

But you know, love isn't just replaced by these obviously problematic things like the need for approval or control. Love can be lost. It can be replaced in the name of good things too. In the name of efficiency.

[8 : 34] We need to get more things done as a church. Let's go, go, go, go, go. Or we can lose love in the name of excellence. We want to make sure everything is as best it can possibly be.

And we have this perfectionistic spirit that drives everything and crowds out real biblical love. Or it can even happen in the name of evangelistic effectiveness.

We want to reach people fruitfully with the gospel. So we end up just trampling on one another and losing love. Now all these things in themselves are good things, right?

We want to be effective and excellent and evangelistically effective. But if we're not careful, they can squeeze out the thing that ought to characterize and drive all that we do, which is love.

And of course, it's easy to see that love is easily replaced, not just in our relationships at church, right? Think of all your other relationships with your family members, with your spouse, with your work colleagues, with your roommates.

[9 : 35] Are not most of the troubles at root a result of the absence of real, biblical, resilient love? And so Paul's going to tell us three things.

Paul's going to tell us about this love as he ends this book, which is about love. And the first thing he's going to show us in verse 13 through 14 is that we have to fight for it.

Let all that you do be done in love is not something that just comes naturally, right? We don't just sort of drift into it. The tides will take us in every other direction, into the directions of approval and control or just mere permissiveness.

We don't just drift into love. We've got to fight for it, Paul says. And that's why he begins by saying, be watchful. Stand firm in the faith. Act like men. Be strong.

That's what it takes to do all that you do in love. Paul here is exhorting us like we're a group of soldiers going into battle.

[10 : 41] He's looking at the church and he's like the coach of a football team in the final seconds of the game. And they're up by six. And we're making our last stand on the one-yard line.

And there it is. The last play of the game. And they're coming at us with one last drive. One last charge into our end zone. And Paul says, you need to stand your ground. Dig in and fight for this.

Well, let's unpack verse 13 a little bit. How do we fight to keep love in the driver's seat of all that we do? First, he says, be watchful.

And watchful here, not just for outside attack or things that can come in and trip you up. Yes, that's true. But Paul, I think, means something more. I think he probably means here, be watchful for the Lord's return.

The same language of being watchful is used very regularly in Paul's letters of being expectant and looking forward to Christ's coming. The king is coming.

[11 : 44] Victory is on the way. That's what chapter 15, right before this, was about, right? Keep your eyes fixed on that great day. And it will keep you from falling prey to all these love replacements.

Because if something that great and that good is coming, and if we're assured our place in it through the resurrection of Christ, then friends, we don't need to worry so much about what people think of us or whether we're calling the shots or any of those other selfish replacements for real love.

Focus on that day in the future, and it will keep you focused in the present, Paul says. But then we're charged to stand firm in the faith.

Or as we might say today in our lingo, keep your identity rooted in the gospel. Stand firm in it. Don't let the other prevailing winds knock you from it.

Martin Lloyd-Jones, a great 20th century preacher in London, once said, Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?

[13 : 02] What he means is this. We go through most of life just listening to whatever our inner self happens to be saying. I'm no good. I'll never measure up. No one loves me.

I'll never change. God couldn't use someone like me. This is just the way I am. But instead of listening all the time, we need to take ourselves up and be talking to ourselves a bit more.

We need to be preaching the gospel to ourselves. We need to be telling ourselves what's true. That we've been bought with a price. That we're adopted sons and daughters of God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

That we're beloved children of the king and ambassadors for his kingdom. That not a single hair will fall from our heads without the father's notice. God's apparently been noticing me a lot over the last few years.

Okay, three sermons in a row and I made a bald joke every time. I'm done. That we're indwelt by his own spirit. Given new hearts to love him and serve him in the world.

[14 : 10] That we're sealed for the day of redemption. That we're guaranteed a place in the new heavens and the new earth. And not just some sort of side marginal place, but a place with Christ where we will see God face to face and reign with him forever.

Paul says, stand firm in the faith. This is the faith. And by the way, just as sort of a little bit of an aside here, this is why you need to be in a small group.

So we can help each other stand firm in the faith. Because you can't do this by yourself. And this is why we should read and study the Bible regularly on our own.

So we can stand firm in the faith because we're forgetful. And we drift. And we lose our footing. We need these means of grace. Not as tokens of our righteousness.

But we need them as means, as engines to keep us rooted in what's true about who we really are and who God really is.

[15 : 17] Lastly, we're exhorted here to act like men. Be strong. Or as the NIV translates it, be courageous. Be strong. Now the strength here isn't the sort of strength that some of the Corinthians thought they had when they called themselves strong and others weak.

That was really just self-serving pride. Rather, as you hear this exhortation to be courageous, be strong, think of Joshua in the Old Testament.

The newly minted leader of God's people standing on the verge of the promised land being charged to lead God's people into battle. And what does God come and say to Joshua as he stands there fearful, maybe even a bit overwhelmed and paralyzed by what God is calling him to do?

God comes and says, be strong and courageous. Why? For I am with you. And I won't leave you or forsake you, Joshua.

And if that's true of Joshua then, then friends, it's true of us today. Because the risen Lord Jesus has promised to be with us even to the end of the age.

[16 : 33] And if the one who has all authority, the Lord Jesus Christ, is with us, then we too can be courageous and strong. So if we're going to do everything in love, we'll need to fight for it.

Love is not for the faint of heart. Especially biblical love. It's easy to be nice, isn't it? It's easy to just let people do and be whatever they decide to do and be and never offer loving correction.

It's easy to merely tolerate each other or just ignore each other, but it's not easy to love. And it's easy to talk about love, isn't it?

You know, the danger with such an all-encompassing command, let all that you do be done in love. The danger with that is that it will just remain an idea.

Some sort of high-floating ideal that never really hits the ground and takes action. You know, often we can think, well, I should be loving to everyone. And as we think about being loving to everyone, we end up being loving to no one.

[17 : 35] But the rest of Paul's conclusion here won't let us off the hook so easily. Yes, we have to fight for it.

That's the first point. But verses 15 through 22 show us that we have to exercise it as well. You have to exercise it. And where do we start? Where do we start to let all that we do be done in love?

Start here, Paul says. Exercise it in real ways, in the real relationships right in front of you. Where do we start exercising this resilient, steadfast love? Paul says, maybe a little uncomfortably, first, take the true leaders in your midst, the ones who are serving and working among you.

Verses 15 through 18 mention Stephanus and Fortunatus and Achaicus. These three were members of the church in Corinth and they were now visiting Paul in Ephesus and they were most likely the ones who were going to come back with this letter of 1 Corinthians and deliver it on Paul's behalf.

And Paul says to the church, be subject to these guys and give recognition to them. In other words, start acting toward them in genuine biblical love.

[18 : 53] Now that's a risky thing for Paul to ask, isn't it? The Corinthian church struggled with idolizing leaders. And Paul doesn't want a repeat of that.

But you know, as you read between the lines here, one gets the impression that Stephanus wasn't a rock star public speaker like Apollos. And we know he wasn't an apostle like Paul or Peter.

So in other words, Stephanus and these other guys weren't the sort of famous leaders that the Corinthians were tempted to idolize and create little factions and fan clubs over. Stephanus probably didn't have a blog.

And he probably didn't have a leadership podcast that everybody tuned into. And he probably wasn't invited to speak at conferences. None of those things are bad, right?

But at the end of the day, what made Stephanus and these other guys real leaders in the church? It was that they had devoted themselves, Paul says, to the service of the saints.

[19 : 58] They were workers. They were laborers, Paul says. What is it that makes a real leader in Christ's church, the ones who love Christ and his word, who faithfully teach the scriptures and who serve, who work, who labor for the sake of the saints?

The old saying goes, how do you tell who the real shepherds are? And the answer is, the ones that smell like sheep. That's one of the questions we ask when we consider new elders.

And you should prayerfully ask it too as you think of people to nominate for the eldership. Who's already shepherding and laboring and discipling even without the title?

Who's eldering already? Who's devoted themselves to the service? Who smells like sheep? You know, you get close to Matt and Greg.

You hang out with James. You get to know Jonathan and Jeff. And I'll tell you, they smell. And if you want to be a leader in Christ's church, friend, you need to smell too.

[21 : 19] But Paul's point here is that we should start to exercise resilient love by loving our leaders. And even though I'm a pastor, this applies to me too.

I'm a member before I'm an elder. So I need to do this as well. And so for all of us, we should recognize faithful servant leaders.

That is, we should encourage them. We should honor them. We should pray for them. We should thank them. Leadership can be a very discouraging role in the church. And Paul goes on and says, we should be subject to faithful servant leaders.

That is, we should heed their warnings and take to heart their encouragements and we should seek their counsel. No, this doesn't mean that leaders in the church are infallible. It doesn't mean they're above correction.

It doesn't mean they're the absolute authorities. No, only God and God's word is that. That's one of the beauties of having God's authoritative word is that it demotes every other human authority and puts us all under the same thing.

[22 : 19] No, church leaders aren't perfect, but they're here for our good. They've devoted themselves to the service of the saints and we should act toward them in love.

But not just leaders. In verses 19 through 20, as Paul is sort of sending greetings to Corinth from the churches in Ephesus and reminding this very self-centered, self-elevated church that they're not doing this on their own, but they're a part of a worldwide network of churches, as he's sending those greetings, Paul reminds the Corinthians to start loving one another.

Exercise love with the people right in front of you, your living, breathing fellow church members. Start putting flesh on the bones of your love right there. Where do we see that in those verses?

With the very end. Paul says, greet one another with a holy kiss. Now what does that mean? Well, if you grew up in an Italian family, you probably get it.

No offense to Italians. When you come home to family, what do you get? You get a big embrace. You get a kiss on the cheek. Maybe you get the double kiss on both cheeks.

[23 : 34] You sit down, you eat some lasagna, whatever. So translation, Paul is saying that you need to greet one another like family. Like you actually love one another.

Now, not everyone grew up in a big Italian family, so not everyone is comfortable with a literal kiss, right? I come from a German background. We're not big on the physical affection thing. I'm still not so sure how to respond.

When people go in for the polite, socially acceptable kiss on the cheek, I get really awkward. You know, that's not my thing. But, even if we're not literally giving a holy kiss, we can translate it, right?

What communicates the embrace and acceptance of family here in our place and in our time and in our church? The holy handshake, maybe? The holy bro hug?

The holy high five? That's the one I give at youth group. But, you know, whatever we do, friends, it's actually a very powerful symbol, as simple as it seems.

[24 : 40] If we'll see it for what it is, it's a symbolic act that says, here in this place, under Christ, we're family.

Even though we come from wildly different backgrounds, in Christ, we are brothers and sisters, brothers, and I'm going to start loving you like a brother or a sister should be loved.

Even though I have a busy schedule, I'm going to make time for you. I'm going to rearrange some of my priorities so we can get to know each other and encourage each other. I'm going to ask how you're doing because I really care about how you're doing, and I want you to give me an honest answer.

I'm going to pray for you, and I'm going to say, I'll pray for you, not just as a way of ending our conversation. I'll pray for you, over and out.

No. I'm going to take time to actually serve you and meet some of your needs when I have the opportunity, even when it's inconvenient. I'm going to seek forgiveness and reconciliation when there's a rift between us or when there's an offense.

[25 : 55] I'm not going to sweep stuff under the rug and hope it goes away. I'm going to address it in the right way at the right time. I'm going to see you as a brother or sister, and I'm going to treat you accordingly.

And again, this is where practically getting involved in a group that's smaller than our gathering on Sundays is so critical, whether it's a small group or whether it's serving on a ministry team together, you need to get to know your fellow church members well enough so you can actually start to serve them and love them and encourage them in personal and real ways.

The ideal of loving one another, of doing all that we do in love, can't just remain an ideal. It has to be put into practice. And in order for that to happen, we have to actually get to know each other. And we've got to find the times and the places and make the sacrifice to make that happen.

But you know, at the end of the day, it's not just love for our leaders or for our fellow church members. In verses 21 through 22, as Paul takes up the pen from his scribe and scribbles a few words in his own hand, he shows us that our love, above all, must be for the Lord Jesus.

He states this principle in a negative way in verse 22. If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. In other words, what's the necessary mark of a Christian? How do you know someone has saving faith in the Lord Jesus?

[27 : 26] Well, one of the ways you know is because they love the Lord. They see Jesus not just as a means to some end, but he is the end.

He's not just their savior who brings them good things, but he's their treasure. Paul prays at the end of verse 22, our Lord, come.

That's the cry of a heart that loves the Lord. And it's actually one of the most ancient prayers that's come down to us from the early church. We want him to come to make things right, to complete the victory that he's won through his death and resurrection.

We want him to come and put an end to sin and death. We want him to come and we want to be with him, the one who loved me and gave himself for me. We want him to come so we can see his glory on display, not just by faith, but by sight, so we pray with hearts that love the Lord.

Come, Lord Jesus. Let all that you do be done in love. First, it's something we have to fight for.

[28 : 39] We won't just drift into it, but second, it's something we have to exercise. We've got to put it into practice in concrete ways. We can't let it just be a nice idea. But of course, as soon as we start fighting for it, and definitely when we start exercising it with real people, we realize how hard it is, don't we?

We realize how costly it is to let all that you do be done in love. And if we try to attempt this on our own strength, friends, I guarantee you, we will fail.

What Paul has been laying out here is impossible if it just came down to us. Because we'll fall back into our old habits too often. Our old motivations will constantly dominate.

And we'll do all that we do for approval or for control or we'll do all that we do for comfort or for pleasure. So we need something to change us and we need something to keep on changing us. And as Paul puts the final words onto this lengthy letter, he comes back again to the only thing that will radically change us.

The thing that we need to keep coming back to in order to really do this. And what is it? It's the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[30 : 01] Christ. That's what Paul reminds them of in verse 23. And in verse 24, he sends them his love, not just generally, but he says, my love to you in Christ Jesus.

It's in him. So he's telling us again, he's reminding us again that real love flows from our status, not just of being people who resolve to be loving, but from people who are in Christ.

If we're in Christ, if we're experiencing his grace, if we're in Christ, then more and more all that we do will be done in love. You see? Because here's the reality, and this is the third and final point we need to make this morning.

We can't really fight for it and we can't really exercise it until we've received it in a real, radical, personal way. And that's why, again and again in this letter, no matter what the problem or the issue has been, whether it's unity or whether it's holiness or whether it's how they care about weaker members in their church or whether it's how they conduct themselves in worship, again and again and again, Paul has brought their sights back to the gospel.

He's brought before our eyes again the Lord Jesus. Jesus who lived a life of perfect love, the life that we couldn't possibly hope to live and who in love went to the cross for us where Christ exchanged places with us, the unrighteous and the unloving for the righteous, the loving one to bring us to God, 1 Peter will say.

[31 : 56] Christ exchanged places with us on the cross and then God raised him from the dead on the third day as Lord and as King so that all who trust in him, so that all who come to him in faith receive a new life and a new heart and forgiveness of sins and then in a relationship with him, seeing that our sins have been taken away and he's done all that for me, we begin to start living a life of genuine love.

Because you see friends, to be sure, love is costly and to do all that you do in love is very costly. It will cost your time and your energy and your resources but when you live in light of what Christ has done for you, that he's bought you with a price, that he's bought you from sin and death with the price of his own life given as a sacrifice, when he's expended and lavished on you that cost because he loves you, and when you're united to him by faith, when you're in Christ Jesus, the implication, as Paul points to here, is that there's no question then of loving in return.

I mean, isn't it amazing that Paul ends this letter by saying, my love be with you all in Christ Jesus? Corinth was a mess. It was a total mess. They were defaming the name of Christ left and right in their life together and Paul still turns to them and says, I love you guys.

Certainly, nothing in Paul's human makeup would have driven him to say that. But Paul knew that he was a sinner saved by radical grace.

And if that was true of him, then how could he not look out at others and love them just the same? let all that you do be done in love.

[34 : 00] Friends, as we conclude, I wonder when people think about us as a church, if they spend time with us, if they are in our sort of orbit for any length of time, what is it that we want them to see?

What is it we want them to go away with? The church of Corinth was a very gifted church, a very vibrant church, a very culturally and socially connected church.

But what Paul wanted was that they become a loving church. Without love, we are nothing, as Paul says so memorably in 1 Corinthians 13.

Without love, we're nothing. Because without love, our life together as a church will produce no lasting fruit. Converts will be few. Disciples will be malnourished.

But even more tragically, without love, we're nothing because our life together will reflect nothing of the glory of God without love. Because the glory of God is displayed supremely at the cross where God in grace poured out his love upon undeserving sinners like you and me.

[35 : 22] But the good news is that Christ has not left us devoid of love. He's not left us to our own resources. He has lavished it on us that we've done nothing to deserve it.

So friends, as we seek as a church to foster a movement of the gospel here in New Haven, as we seek to see God's glory resound more and more and more in our neighborhoods and on our campuses and in our workplaces and in our friendships and in our playgroups on the playgrounds, as we want to see Christ exalted and made much of and have it roll like ocean tides throughout our city, as we seek to see God glorified here in our place and our time, the good news is that as we stay close to Christ and as the Spirit keeps kindling that fire of His grace in our hearts, then we will do all that we do in love.

It will begin to flow and our fruit will last and God's name will be praised. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we do ask that as we begun this service, as we begun by praying that You would open the eyes of our hearts to see how wide and long and high and deep is Your love for us.

As we begun by praying for strength to grasp how deep Your love is for us, Lord Jesus, that's how we end this morning, that You would help us to get hold of it in fresh ways this morning.

[37 : 14] Oh Lord, break through our calloused hearts. Lord, break through the familiarity and help us to see it anew.

And Lord, as we launch out on a new season, Lord, as the fall begins and as we come back to school or as we re-engage our workplaces, God, we pray, oh, we pray that You would let us do all that we do in love.

And may the world see it. And may their hunger for You grow until they come to confess Jesus as Savior and Lord.

We pray in His name, Father. Amen.