

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
February 11, 2024

The Final Word

1 Corinthians 16:13-24

After Paul has dealt with so many difficult and delicate issues in the church in Corinth, what more could he possibly have to say? After addressing contested issues like congregational cliques, human pride, sex in marriage, idol meat, hairstyles and gender distinctions, a chaotic Lord's Supper, and confusion about spiritual gifts during worship, what other ground possibly needs to be covered? And especially after his eloquent and lengthy argument about the resurrection of the dead and the transformation of believers' bodies—the very heart of the gospel—what more could Paul possibly add? Like any good preacher, he saved the weightiest matter for last, the resurrection of the body. So what better time to bring this message to a close, say a prayer, and issue the altar call?

It turns out though, that Paul isn't quite done. There's more to say, though not as in a sermon that just keeps on going. Recall that 1 Corinthians is primarily a letter. And like all good letters, this one has a conclusion. In one respect, it gets underway at the beginning of chapter 16, where Paul gives directions about a collection he has been working on for the poor among the believers in Jerusalem, provides an update on his travel plans, and commends Timothy to the Corinthians. From there Paul shifts to a more formal letter closing.

This conclusion starts with a series of general and brief exhortations in verses 13-14. It was customary for Roman letters to close with some occasional remarks and final words of advice, which is exactly what we see Paul doing here. But his guidance is grounded in the truth of the gospel and the new reality created by the death and resurrection of Christ.

"Be on your guard," is Paul's first imperative. He reminds the Corinthians to always see their lives in light of the coming of the Lord, to remain watchful, and to conduct themselves in ways that are appropriate to that hope. Then Paul urges the Corinthians to "stand firm in the faith." In other words, they need to ground their identity in the gospel and hold fast to the message that has been proclaimed to them. Next, Paul urges them to "be courageous; be strong." The accent here isn't on masculinity but on maturity. Instead of being boastful or arrogant, they need to continue to grow up in the way of Christ.

Then Paul closes this string of exhortations with what matters most. "Do everything in love." It can also be translated "Let all that you do be done in love" (NRSV). Notice how Paul has saved the most important for last. As one commentator has put it, "This distills the message of the letter into a single sentence."¹

This shouldn't come as a surprise to the Corinthians. After all, Paul has underscored the priority of love at other points in this letter. At the beginning of chapter 8, he takes up questions the Corinthians have about whether to eat meat from animals that have been sacrificed to idols. Some in the congregation have "knowledge" that there is only one real God and that these pagan idols are nothing. Therefore they should be free to eat as they want. But others in the congregation are more cautious about eating such meat, fearing that they could be participating in idolatry. Paul's basic response is that love is more important than knowledge, and that those who are knowledgeable need to be mindful of

those who have reservations about eating idol meat. The church, says Paul, is built on the foundation of love, not on a particular sophisticated theological understanding that some may possess. "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up" (8:1).

A few chapters later, in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul is instructing the congregation on the use of spiritual gifts, particularly in its worship gatherings. Some were exercising their gifts in ways that promoted pride and division. But Paul says, "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" (v. 1).... Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud (v. 4).... Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away (v. 8). And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (v. 13). Perhaps here at the end of Paul's letter, the Corinthians still have some of these words ringing in their ears as they hear Paul wrap things up by saying, "Do everything in love."

But there's still a little more to say. Paul knows that one of the best ways to cultivate love is to cite examples of love in action. He praises the members of the household of Stephanas, who have devoted themselves to the service of the Christian community (vv. 15-18). By their love they have demonstrated that they are faithful representatives of the gospel. Then Paul passes along greetings from Aquila and Priscilla, two of his missionary associates. These "brothers and sisters" share a familial intimacy with Paul and with the Corinthians. In fact, one of the ways they symbolize this deep sense of relatedness is through the practice of the "holy kiss" (v. 20). In the early church, this was a sign of greeting among people who love one another. It's easy to think of it as just a religious formality, but consider what it would have been like to practice this expression of reconciliation in a divided congregation where church members had been estranged from one another. The time comes for worshipers to turn and greet one another, and the first person you see, in the pew right behind you, is the person with whom you recently had a falling out. Paul's call to love is tough and costly. We'll reflect on that more in a few moments.

But for now, note in our text how Paul's next move is to stop dictating and to start writing. Paul usually dictated his letters to a scribe, but there are times when he takes up the pen to essentially sign his name and add a few words in his own hand. In today's text, he attaches four short sentences. Each one is a self-contained parting thought.

First Paul says, "If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be cursed!" (v. 22). Not something you're likely to see on a Valentine's card. We may naturally wonder why, at the conclusion of a letter about love in the community of believers, Paul pronounces a curse on those who don't share his passion for and devotion to the Lord Jesus. To many, this might come across as unnecessarily abrasive. But we need to remember that Paul's purpose throughout his letter is to form Christian community. The hallmark of that community is love. And yet, not everybody accepts Jesus or loves Jesus. Paul may even have in mind folks who profess to love Jesus yet are harming the congregation by magnifying themselves rather than magnifying the Lord. Whatever the specifics of the situation in Corinth, Paul's words are a reminder that there are consequences to rejecting the gospel, and to professing Christ's lordship without practicing Christ's way.

Then Paul offers what's essentially a prayer. He says, "Come, Lord!" (v. 22). This is a plea for the return of the risen Lord. He's the only one who can implement God's triumph over sin and death, sort out true from false believers, and fully establish God's reign of love. Rather than trying to take matters of final judgement into our own hands, we in the church are called to wait in active faithfulness, grounding our lives in hope, confident that God will bring to completion the redemption and reconciliation he has begun through Christ.

Paul then moves from praying to blessing. As he does in most of his letters, so here, Paul pronounces a benediction upon the Corinthians. "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you" (v. 23). Paul had opened the letter by saying, "I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus" (1:4). Now he brings the letter full circle. He wants God's grace to continue in the lives of these believers, individually and together. God's grace is what encompasses everything about them and their life in Christ. What a fitting conclusion. The benediction has been pronounced, the ushers have propped open the sanctuary doors, and now the congregation can go to the fellowship hall and eat together.

But once again, Paul isn't quite done. One of the things that makes 1 Corinthians distinctive is that Paul adds a final note after the grace benediction. "My love to all of you in Christ Jesus" (v. 24). That certainly sounds appropriate. We Christians are accustomed to sharing affirmations of love when we're about to part. Think of the times when you've finished your fellowship and interaction with others here at the church, and as you step away to head for the door you make sure you say, "Love you," "Love you all," or "Love you guys." But Paul's expression of love is particularly remarkable as the conclusion of a letter as stormy as this one. First Corinthians gives us a window into the conflict, clashes, and confusion that troubled this congregation. We can see and hear the tensions and turbulence in Paul's relationship with them. And yet, the grace of God has created an unbreakable bond of love between him and them, and among them within the fellowship.

So as Paul prepares to say the Amen, he reaches out to tell them that in the midst of all the struggles and strife, and all the reconciliation that still needs to happen, God still loves them, and he does too. "My love to *all of you*," says Paul. All of you. My love to those of you who have promoted unity and my love to those of you whose boasting has fractured the fellowship. My love to those of you who think my preaching is solid and my love to those of you who think I'm not very impressive in the pulpit. My love to those of you who steer clear of idol meat and my love to those of you who think you have every right in the world to eat it. My love to those of you who speak in tongues and my love to those of you who can't understand a word they're saying. My love to those of you who enthusiastically affirm the resurrection of the dead and my love to those of you who still have a lot to learn about this article of the faith. My love to all of you.

It's one thing to profess a love for God and for other people. It's another thing to work out that love in the complexities and challenges of life with specific people in a specific community of faith. Paul knew firsthand the truth captured by the English Puritan minister John Owen, who wrote, "Let none pretend that they love the brethren in general, and love the people of God, and love the saints, while their love is not fervently exercised towards those who are in the same church society with them. Christ will try your love at the last day by your deportment in that church wherein you are."² The English may sound older and different from what we're used to, but the essential message remains the same, namely, that love for the Lord is the essential condition of life in the community of Christians, and that such love is authenticated by how you and I exercise it toward one another in the specifics of our congregation.

When it comes to his relationship with the Corinthians, Paul's love, like God's own love, is a costly, peace-making love, a love that reaches out to overcome conflict and bring about reconciliation. It's a love for all. "Let all that you do be done in love." Love is the final word. Amen.

¹ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) 289.

² Quoted in *Leadership*, Vol. 9, No. 3.