

## “Spiritual Unity Comes from Spiritual Maturity”

*1 Corinthians 16:13-24*

We now come to the end of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. We learned last week that he wants to come see them and minister to them but he’s going to take the long way on land up north towards Macedonia (because he feels there’s a great door of ministry opportunity), then go south back down to Corinth where he hopes to spend the winter there. That’s a while yet and in this letter we’ve learned that the church was very divided over numerous issues. They were divided because they were spiritually immature. We saw this especially in 1 Cor. 11:18-19 when he wrote,

*<sup>17</sup> In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. <sup>18</sup> In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. <sup>19</sup> No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval.*

The church disagreed on a number of non-doctrinal issues. In their spiritual immaturity, they argued about which one was right. Because for many, being right is all that matters. And when you’re right and I’m wrong, we immaturely believe God approves of us and not the other. Does that even sound mature listening to me say that? No, it does not.

They disagreed about who their favourite bible teacher was. About whether women should wear head coverings. About whether you should eat meat sacrificed to idols or not. About whether you can speak in tongues or not. This disunity was a result of their spiritual immaturity, which showed up in their lackadaisical attitudes towards a man and his mother-in-law in an inappropriate relationship. When believers were taking each other to court. When wealthier believers would not wait for their poorer brothers at their communion meals. At their chaotic worship services where people were speaking whenever they felt like it; some in tongues without interpretation, some prophesying, a lot of which was not edifying and a poor witness to unbelievers. And then about doubting their own future bodily resurrection yet believing that Jesus bodily rose.

Spiritual unity happens when people are growing spiritually in Christ and maturing in love, acknowledging our differences but not letting them divide us; even setting aside personal preferences for the sake of God’s glory and each other’s maturing. As Paul wraps up his letter, he touches on this main issue and he does it very gracefully. Because you’re probably thinking, it just looks like a few exhortations and greetings to some people we don’t know!

He starts this final section with 5 brief commands, almost as if it were a biblical mantra to review constantly as a way of strengthening yourself and the body of Christ. These commands are not a one-time only action. You have to continually work on these because

### **Unity in Christ Requires Continual Effort** **(16:13-14)**

This very brief sentence (only 7 words in Greek) is like a spiritual protein bar; it may seem small but it sure has a lot of good for you. *Be on the alert. Or be watchful, on your guard.* About what? Look what he warned them about just a few verses prior in 15:30-34 about not believing in the resurrection.

<sup>30</sup> And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? <sup>31</sup> I die every day—I mean that, brothers—just as surely as I glory over you in Christ Jesus our Lord. <sup>32</sup> If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” <sup>33</sup> Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.” <sup>34</sup> Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame.

The Corinthian’s immaturity and failure to believe they will have glorified physical bodies with Christ one day was because they listened to the philosophers of their day who continually taught that there is no physical existence after death, so get all the gusto you can now! Don’t let the anti-god masses sway you. Don’t let popular opinions and spin-doctors of our day who doubt the Bible and God and Jesus and so many other things. Everyone, be on your guard against falsehood. Which comes from people. What kind of people are influencing you most of the day? Maybe you’re surrounded by co-workers who have no faith, who swallow and repeat the lies of our culture and talk about these things as if everyone believes them. Maybe you’re the only believer in your family and you’re being criticized because you are so ‘narrow-minded’ and ‘unloving’. Maybe your classmates ridicule you for your faith and constantly try to trip you up or make you look foolish for trusting the truth. This is our reality. Be proactive. Be on your guard. There is a sense of vigilance to this word. Paul used it when he warned the elders in Ephesus in Acts 20:31 that after he leaves.

<sup>29</sup> I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. <sup>30</sup> Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

Be on your guard; the enemy always wants you to draw you away from the truth. *Stand firm in faith.* Which means we have to know what we believe and remain firm on what we believe. Paul’s not talking about our preferences here. He’s talking about core beliefs. Creation, the virgin birth, the death and resurrection of Christ, faith alone saves you, Jesus is coming back, heaven and hell.

*Phil. 1:27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel <sup>28</sup> without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God.*

Our willingness not to bend on what we believe, even when oppressed, is itself a witness. This must be awfully important if we’re unwilling to change our minds about Christ. These two commands and the next two are all different ways we stay united, but

### ***Each of us need to grow spiritually (v.13)***

The reference from Phil. 1:27 shows us that individual maturity results in corporate unity. “*act like men*” or be courageous or be men of courage are all ways of saying, mature and grow up. Back in Ch. 13 when Paul was teaching them about their disagreements over spiritual gifts, he reminded them in 13:8

<sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.

All their divisiveness over preferences was a sign of their spiritual immaturity. 'Act like a man' means grow up! Make more mature decisions based on learning truth and applying it. And "be strong" is passive meaning, be strengthened by someone. Let the Lord strengthen you.

I think some people treat studying the Bible and prayer similar to a physical work out. If I read my bible more and pray more I'll strengthen myself spiritually. As if we do it to ourselves. Paul says be strengthened; let someone strengthen you as we read the Bible, and as we pray, we listen to what God is saying and allow Him to strengthen us. We make better choices because we apply the Word to our life. We won't respond in anger or frustration to negative circumstances and instead allow God's peace and strength help us resist. We turn away from temptation not because we are strong because we believe by faith obeying God produces a healthier and more satisfying joy than the temporal but empty temptation of sin.

And v. 14 wraps them altogether, "*Do everything in love.*" What kind of love? Agape love, sacrificial love. Unity in Christ requires continual effort to

### ***Love others by sacrificing self (v.14)***

We died to self when we accepted Christ. He lives in us. We are to choose to act and love like He does, putting others ahead of ourselves even when it costs us. This is why Paul was so frustrated by their spiritual immaturity over these issues, as if they truly believed God approved of them and frowned on others because you refused to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Or you could speak in tongues and others could not. Yet those attitudes are still around today aren't they? That's why Paul told the stronger believer to be the one to set aside their preferences so that those not as mature would grow in time and grow by following your more mature example of unity.

And I believe that's why he mentions people's names now. Why does he mention these people now? So that his Corinthians leaders would grow and learn to also

## **Model Unity for Others** **(16:15-18)**

*<sup>15</sup> You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. I urge you, brothers, <sup>16</sup> to submit to such as these and to everyone who joins in the work, and labors at it. <sup>17</sup> I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you. <sup>18</sup> For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such men deserve recognition.*

Paul mentioned baptizing Stephanus' household back in 1:16 so Stephanus was well-known to the church and involved at some point. Paul holds them up as examples of godly people to follow because they are committed to serving believers. Paul pleads with the believers to place themselves under them to help the church grow. The word 'devoted' and 'submit' are the same words in Greek. Stephanus and his crew humbled themselves to serve others. Unity only happens when there is mutual submission to the Lord and to each other out of love. We all need to

### ***Grow in humility (vv.15-16)***

The Corinthian church lacked humility. They divided because no one would bend on their position. Because they had to be right and had to have God's approval. Ironically God doesn't approve of arrogance and modelled humility to us in sending His One and Only Son to die for us. Follow Stephanus, learn from him and follow his example of

## ***Focusing on others (vv.17-18)***

The attitude that I must be right and my perspective meets God's approval and not yours is sinful and selfish.

*Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus ... supplied what was lacking from you. <sup>18</sup> For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such men deserve recognition.*

No doubt supplied sacrificially. Maybe this was why Paul had needs because the Corinthians were more focused on themselves rather than Paul's needs. Paul's needs were for his expenses to go to other churches. A little rebuke here. No doubt the Corinthians didn't know about Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus ministry to Paul. They didn't do it for recognition. *"Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand that He may lift you up in due time" (1 Pet. 5:6)*. Focus on others and let God lift you up if He wants to. Just serve Him quietly for His glory. Grow in humility. Focus on others and the body becomes more unified.

And Paul's own example as he ends his letters telling believers to greet other believers warmly reminds us to

## **Keep Communicating** **(16:19-24)**

Who did you communicate with this week in the church family? Was it a response to someone else reaching out to you or were you proactive and reached out to them? Maybe you saw them in the community and took a few seconds out of your agenda to greet them. Or maybe your greeting was a check-in text or email or phone call 'Hey, how are things going? It speaks volumes when people do that to us because it tells us, 'Hey, someone was actually thinking about me.'" Someone was praying for me. Someone went out of their way to encourage me, run an errand for me, check up on me.

*<sup>19</sup> The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house. <sup>20</sup> All the brothers here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss. <sup>21</sup> I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand.*

We know Paul had others do the actual writing of his letters but he often took time to write something himself. Aquila and Priscilla had been to Corinth and they told Paul 'Make sure you tell the Corinthians we say hi and we're praying for them.' And other churches across the sea say hi over in Asia Minor, which was where Paul was at the moment. Stay connected. Do we have to greet one another with a holy kiss? Each culture has its own 'greetings' but what interests me here is the word for greeting. It sounds more formal; 'Aspazomai'. Let's aspazomai as many people today before you go. And aspazomai people during the week.

Before Paul finishes his letter he pronounces a curse on those who do not love the Lord (meaning reject Him) and then he says 'Maranatha' which means Come Lord. As in any church, there are always a few that have yet (or never will) accept Christ. With these two thoughts in the same sentence Paul was probably saying Jesus is coming back, make sure you're ready to meet him.

And finally he signs off with his wish/prayer for grace and love to be abundant in the believer's lives. If we are people growing in grace and love, we will grow in unity as well. Grace of the Lord Jesus + love of Christ = unity in Christ.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please  
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