

CLEAN UP DUTY, PART 2
1 Corinthians 16:5 to the end
June 20, 2010

INTRODUCTION

This is it. This is the final sermon on 1 Corinthians. Even if I don't finish, this is it. Join me as we look at some more of the odds and ends with which Paul concludes this letter.

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 16:5-24

5 I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, 6 and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. 7 For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. 8 But I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; 9 for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

Among the odds and ends to be examined here is Paul's attitude towards choosing what he will do next. He plans on traveling through Macedonia, and he might stay the winter with them. He is not sure. He knows when he does get to Corinth, they are to help him on his journey. This, no doubt, means they are to replenish his supplies. He says he hopes to spend some time with them, but defers to the Lord's plan. If the Lord permits it, he will do it. He has decided to remain in Ephesus though, because he sees that a door for service has opened to him, but there are adversaries. What we see here is a man who is using his common sense and wisdom to make his ministry and travel plans.

He is not certain what God will allow. God has not told him. So he is doing what he thinks is best in his mind. He is using his human reasoning to determine what decisions he will make. One of the most troubling questions for Christians is, "What is the will of God for my life?" Or "What does God want me to do?" Many people can't even make decisions without great fear that they might be "stepping outside of the will of God." Many make decisions that seem best to them and those decisions become difficult, and they begin to have regrets, as if they have taken a wrong path and that is why things are going wrong.

How do we know what God would have us do? Paul is a great example here and throughout his letters. He is constantly making plans based on what he thinks makes sense to him, and being humble enough to think that God can stop him or change his mind if He wants to. Rarely does he say, "God said go here and there and decide this or that." He indicates such communication at the time; but that is not the norm. The norm seems to be that he has his ultimate direction determined by God and he is responsible to make all the decisions along the way if God doesn't intervene. He says, "Perhaps" I'll stay with you this winter. He says, "I intend" to come through Macedonia. He is using his own plans, his own sensibility, and his own wisdom, to choose when to come and go.

One of the factors in his travel plans is what he views as opportunities. He says he sees a door of service open in Ephesus. What does that mean? Opportunity! Opportunity is knocking and he sees a possibility of accomplishing his mission in some way, which is to bring the gospel to the gentiles, planting churches among them, and training leaders to do the same. He says that he has an open door but that there are many adversaries. I think we need to think this through a bit. We should pray for God open the way before us in life, but we need to not think that God's opening and closing of opportunities has anything to do with making the mission easy. He sees a chance for the gospel but many enemies; many obstacles stand in the way. He still sees it as an open door.

Us and the Will of God

What can we learn from Paul here? We can learn a couple of important things. First, God gives you many general directions: spread the gospel, work with your hands and supply your own needs, love your wife or husband, honor your father and mother, make disciples of all nations, etc. But He makes no promise to tell you every time you come to a decision what you should do. We can be tempted to feel insecure, thinking, "If I was really spiritual I'd know what God wants me to do, whether he wants me to take this job, marry this girl, go to this school, buy this house, go into the mission field, teach children, or host a community group." We can be tempted to think that the really good Christians always know because they walk so close with God and He tells them.

But this is not the pattern of the Scripture. There are times God makes things clear with a word or a vision. But that is not the norm. The norm is that the church and the Christians in the church have to make up their own minds how they will best run their lives and ministries. Sometimes people try to use an open door/closed door approach. Thinking, "If God opens a door, I'll walk through it, and if He doesn't, I won't." Then they let random events make their choices for them. Someone might say, "I interviewed with 3 companies and two of them did not call back and one did. So I know that it's God will that I take the one that invited me, for He opened that door." That's not sound thinking. What if that one company that offered the job is bad for you in every way? What if it has the potential to lead you into sin and drag you away from your family and cause you to compromise your faith? What if God doesn't want you to do it at all? What if you are better suited for another job? When Paul saw an open door, it was one filled with adversaries. It was the job that turned him down, or wasn't offered to him, apparently, that he wanted to pursue. How did he arrive at that decision? He arrived there in his own reasoning.

Let me give you an example from my own life. When I was in seminary, I preached often in a little Baptist church in the country that needed a pastor. I did not intend to pastor there, just to preach. As time went on, they invited me to be their pastor. I was less than a year away from getting my seminary degree, but the door opened for me to begin being a pastor right away. Was it God's will for me to do that? That was, after all, my goal. That was an open door. How would I decide? Through prayer? Yes. I prayed. My wife prayed. But that alone wasn't going to make my decision for me. Ultimately, I thought through the pro's and con's and determined that it was more important that I continued to learn and finish the goal of getting my degree, and then see

what the opportunities were afterwards. I chose what made the most sense to me, taking into account that I was seeking to work for God and pastor in His church. I made that decision, told the church of my decision. They weren't happy with me. But I didn't lose any sleep wondering whether I was in the will of God or not.

Let me give you another example. Many wonder about the call to ministry. How does one determine to be a pastor? Well, for me it went like this. I wanted to be a pastor really bad. I wanted to preach. That was the factor that pushed me the most. Add to that, I seemed to have the gifting to do what pastors do. I also had a wife who supported me in the effort, and I knew many church folks who thought it was a good idea too. With all that, I made a decision based on reason. I made that decision and then some obstacles came up in my life. So I saw that I needed to wait until they were out of the way. Nine years later, those obstacles were out of the way. So I chose to go to seminary at the age of 30. I made that decision and never wondered if I was in the will of God or not.

God expects us to make decisions based on being sensible people. He has given us brains and He wants us to use them and He wants us to make decisions. We consult Him by prayer, but not only prayer. We also consult His word. And we consult His people. Then we make what seems to be the best choice. We decide. This is the most common way of staying in the will of God. We make the decisions that seem best to us. That might not sound too spiritual, but that's how we do it.

Now, making that decision requires three main ingredients. First you need information. This will come from the Scriptures and the evidence you gather in the world around you. Second you need faith. You pray and trust that the God who hears your prayers loves you and guides you. Then, once you make the decision, you believe that God has led you. And finally, you need wisdom. Wisdom is acquired through humility and His Word. "There is wisdom in a multitude of counselors." We gather wise people around us. We listen to them and think through their advice. We search the scripture. Then, we make the best decision we can. Then we trust God.

Making decisions yourself takes both courage and faith. Can I give you any examples of this from the Scripture? Sure. We have Paul's travel plans here. But we also have Acts 15, where there was a church problem and the solution was to gather all the church leaders together and debate it for a long time, listen to one another, hear the word, then decide on a solution that, as the Bible said, "Seemed good to them." You see, to determine the will of God in this way is the way that glorifies God the most. For it not only requires faith to decide, it depends on faith for you must believe that the God whom you cannot see, is invisibly guiding all the details of your life.

I hope you will see that you can be at peace. You don't have to have endless self-doubt and second-guessing. If what you are deciding is not sin, and it seems to advance the kingdom of God, and if you have prayed and called on God, looked to His Word and His people for advice, then He is guiding you.

I talk to pastors and they can sometimes love to sound spiritual. I'll say, "So, why did you come to this church?" So often they answer, "Because God told me too." Then I normally say, "Yeah, yeah, I know. But why did you really come." Usually they get insulted, think me unspiritual and try to figure out if I'm really a pastor. But I know there is a decision making process that went on. I want to know about that process, because the way they came to that conclusion says a lot about what sort of faith they have. "God told me to come," can be a cover-up for, "I wanted to because it paid better and no one liked me at the other church anyway."

I am not saying that God might not just say to you, "Hey, get up and go here and do this or that." But I am saying that this is not the norm. If He does, then you have it easy on that decision. But even so, that doesn't mean God is going to make all the little and medium sized decisions for you along the way. He wants you to. You are free to. You are His son or daughter and He is guiding you, even though sometimes you don't know it.

Wow, that took a long time to cover, didn't it? I guess I'm only going to have time for one more detail to look into. Let's let it be verse 13.

13 Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. 14 Let all that you do be done in love.

I love this exhortation. It is so politically incorrect! He is speaking to the men and women of Corinth, but he says, "Act like men!" This implies two understandings: one, that men are to step up and lead in the church, and second, that to be a man is not a bad thing and that the word man should describe positive virtues.

Why is it, in our society, you cannot give the general exhortation, "Act like men?" What is it we have against masculinity? We don't say, "Act like men" in our society. And you know what? Because of that, we have few people who act like men. We can hardly understand what this command means. You know what would make better sense to our culture? If we said, instead of "act like men" we said, "Act like the knights of the round table." These men, if you happen to know who they are, were known to be strong, well trained, but set apart by their virtues. They were loyal men, loyal to what was good and right. They were chaste, not violating other men's wives or daughters. They were courageous and disciplined themselves to submit to one another, and to their God.

Virtuous men; where are they now? The men who won't call women female dogs and won't treat them as such, even if they act that way. Where are the men who are loyal, giving their word seldom and breaking it never? Where are the men who have courage, who will do what is right even when everyone else says it's okay to do wrong? Where are the man who put themselves last and everyone else first, who provide for themselves and for the poor, who will never use their power to oppress and always use it to protect? Where are the men who stand firm?

Paul says to the men of Corinth, “Act like men.” He is saying the same to the men everywhere. I urge the men here to constantly improve. Treat every female you meet with honor. Never lie, never steal, and stand up to men who do. Hold tight to the truth of Jesus and don’t flinch when you are opposed. Be ready for the righteous fight of God; discipline yourself away from the weaknesses and sins of this world, so that you can stand. Lead your families, your wives, with honor, strength and gentleness. This is the call of God on your life. Be strong, as true men are to be. And, let all you do be done in love. We are always coming back to love, aren’t we?

When it comes down to it, the only thing that matters is that we love. Love is not to be something we do when we are not doing something else, it is to permeate, motivate, and be a part of everything we do. At your job, be motivated by the joy you get out of improving the life of your customers, co-workers and bosses. At your home, be motivated and choose your actions in words by taking joy in watching others around you be encouraged and lifted up. In all things love, not just in some. We are always going to come back to love. Love of God is the number one commandment. Love of one another is always second. And love is always the mark of a spiritual man or woman. How you treat people is the measure of your faith—especially how you treat those who are socially powerless, or how you treat those in your own home.

Love requires taking joy in being last. Love requires humility. Love is taking your joy by delighting in others and then living that out. If you delight in me, then you will do all you can to see to it that I am doing well. You will be happiest when I am happy. So you will live for my joy. That is love. When you love God, you delight in Him and so want to do those things in which He takes delight, so that you can feel His pleasure in you. When you love your neighbor, it is the same. You delight in your friend, and because of that, you are made happy by seeing his or her joy. This is to be the joy of your life. This is how it is with Jesus. He took joy in His Father and always did those things that pleased Him. And His Father was pleased. And He loved us by delighting us and seeking our greatest joy. Then, He acted in love, dying on a cross in order to take away our shame and give us joy. Love is not one thing in life, it is the only thing. Who do you love? Who do you act like you love?