

This morning I am finishing up my sermon series on the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians, which I have entitled “The gospel changes everything.” 1 Corinthians is a letter written by the apostle Paul to a church in Corinth which he started around the year 50 AD. He stayed in Corinth and built up the church for a year and a half before moving on to start another church, and then he wrote this letter around the year 54-55 AD in response to issues that he heard were going on in the church. This morning we will be reading chapter 16, the final chapter, paying particular attention to verses 13-14, and I’ll be doing a recap of the heart of this letter today.

1 Corinthians 16:1 - Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. ² On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. ³ Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. ⁴ If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me. ⁵ After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you-- for I will be going through Macedonia. ⁶ Perhaps I will stay with you awhile, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, **wherever I go**. ⁷ I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. ⁸ But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹ because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me. ¹⁰ If Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am. ¹¹ No one, then, should refuse to accept him. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with the brothers. ¹² Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you **with the brothers**. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity. ¹³ **Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong.** ¹⁴ **Do everything in love.** ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ to submit to such as these and to everyone who joins in the work, and labors at it. ¹⁷ I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you. ¹⁸ For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. **Such men deserve recognition.** ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ All the brothers here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss. ²¹ I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. ²² If anyone does not love the Lord-- a curse be on him. Come, O Lord! ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. ²⁴ My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Now, there isn't much in this chapter that is necessarily relevant or inspirational for us today, but that is because this chapter clearly illustrates one of the main realities about reading the Bible – it wasn't addressed to us. This letter was not dropped out of the sky from God to us in 21st century America. No, as you read chapter 16, you clearly see that this is a letter, that it has an author, that he is writing to specific people in specific circumstances. This highlights one of the main responsibilities we have in properly reading the Bible, which is to read it in its context. The more we understand who Paul was, what was going on in Corinth, and what issues he was addressing, the more we can understand how to then take the contents of his letter and apply it to our circumstances today.

So notice first of all that this is a letter. Secondly, look at v. 13-14, the part that seems most relevant to Christians of every generation or culture:

¹³ Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. ¹⁴ Do everything in love.

Notice that with the language Paul uses, he appears to treat their lives and faith as serious, almost like they are in a war, like they are on the battlefield. You see, it is clear from this letter that Paul loves this church. In fact, he signs off at the end by telling them just that. After all, what would compel someone to write this long a letter, 16 pages worth! It's because Paul loves them. **His clear desire in this letter is that the people of this church would be all that God has intended for them to be, to reach maturity in Christ.** Notice his pastoral heart, in this chapter and throughout his letter, and throughout all his letters. His is a parental love that desires the best for his children, that they would be protected from harm, that they would be grounded in truth, that they would live courageously, that they would be people of great love towards others. This is how Paul is with the churches he starts. Think of Paul with the Ephesians elders in Acts 20, weeping because he has to leave them and knowing that after he leaves, hard times are going to come upon them. Think of what he writes in Galatians 4:19-20 -

***Galatians 4:19-20** - My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth **until Christ is formed** in you, ²⁰ how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!*

Now, I would imagine the women who are listening might take offense at a man using the term “the pains of childbirth.” But he making a point that the best analogy he can come up with to describe is attitude towards his church is that he is

laboring with all his might to see those men and women become all that God intended for them to be. He is suffering out of love for them, that they might become mature, like Christ. And in the case of the Corinthian church, Paul sees how immature they are, and it pains him:

*1 Corinthians 3:1-2 - Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly-
- mere infants in Christ. ² I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.*

Paul knows that life is not easy. It is not a picnic. Life is a battle, and there is an enemy bent on destroying them. But oh how he loves them and wants them to win the battle, or better yet, to stay near the one who can win the battle for them.

Why do I say all of this? I love you too, and want you to know more than anything how much God loves you. Like Paul, I deeply want to see you embrace God's saving love for you and be transformed, be set free from your sins, from your sadness, from your anxiety, from your addictions, to walk in the joy that comes from being loved by God.

I want to go back to v. 13-14, to read the parts of that passage more closely and use it to summarize the letter of 1 Corinthians.

1) Be on your guard

Once again, this life is not easy. It can be a constant fight to just make it through the day for many of us. Relationships to navigate, or loneliness to navigate. Jobs to perform, bosses or parents or spouses to please, or children and employees to watch out for. Internal struggles to overcome and not let overcome us. Throw into the mix disease and the breakdown of our bodies. Life is hard, and requires a great deal of work if we're going to meet the challenges that come our way. **But anything worth doing takes hard work, and working out your salvation, surrendering yourself to God's will, is no different.** It is hard work. And there is an enemy who is hell bent on dividing and destroying. And so Paul begins this verse by telling them to be on their guard. And I say along with him, be on your guard.

1 Peter 5:8 - Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour

The enemy uses many tactics to try to destroy us, both personally and as a church. He used forces from the outside in Corinth—idolatry and sexual temptation and

false teaching and temptations to compromise their beliefs in order to not be rejected. In our lives he can use the same – tempting us to trust in things other than God, to put our hope in things of this world, to look to something other than God to satisfy us. He can tempt us away from God with sexual temptation, financial temptation, relational temptation, or many other means. He can bring false messages into our lives about who God is, who we are, and why we are here. He can use the circumstances of our lives to beat us down and to try to convince us that God is not good, that He does not love us.

And the enemy can also use forces from the inside – in the Corinthian church, many of their problems started with their own pride and fears. If you remember, this letter did not begin with praise, but went straight into correction. They were full of division that comes from their pride.

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹ My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ¹² What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?

He can play off your own fears, anxieties, desires, and insecurities to get you to turn from trusting in God to trust in other things or to find your identity in your relationships, your looks, your status, your bank account, or so many other things.

The enemy is always trying to divide and destroy. **So be on your guard.** Watch out – he is prowling around like a roaring lion. Now, having said that, what are we to do? Look for the devil underneath every rock? No – there is a better way to be on your guard:

2) **Stand firm in the faith**

The best way to be on your guard is by standing firm in the faith. Stand firm in the truth of who God is and who you are in Him. Remember that in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul has just reminded them of the gospel and the truth of the resurrection.

***1 Corinthians 15:1-8** - Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.*

Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Stand firm in the faith that has been passed down to you. You are saved by grace, justified, perfect in God's sight. Nothing Satan can do can take you out of His hands. You are adopted as God's own child. My dad can beat up your dad. You are a new creation, with God's Holy Spirit in you. He has given you a new heart, new spirit, new desires. You have been given eternal life, and so you know that all your heart desires will one day be yours forever. And so there is no need to look to this world to fulfill your desires.

Stand firm in the faith. He has given you His Word. Think of Jesus, tempted by Satan, responding with "it is written" over and over. You best stay on your guard by standing firm in the faith, by watching your life and doctrine closely.

1 Timothy 4:16 - Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

The Corinthian church was trusting in their own wisdom and thought they were spiritually mature when they actually weren't. Stay humble, stay hungry, stay connected.

Watch your life. Make sure you have people watching your back and walking with you in the battle. And watch you doctrine. Do not believe lies, but read and trust in God's Word.

3) **Be men of courage; be strong**

Be courageous. Faithfulness to God in Corinth was going to result in financial and social consequences. It was going to take courage to walk with the Lord. If it doesn't take courage, then perhaps your Jesus is too much like the American culture you live in.

John 15:20 - Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they **persecuted me**, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.

It also meant that they would appear foolish.

1 Corinthians 1:18,22-24 - For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... ²² Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

This road is not for the faint-hearted. It takes courage to follow God, to sacrifice, to give, to love. Again, do not go it alone. Come daily to the Lord for strength, and depend upon the prayers and support of your brothers and sisters in Christ when you are weak.

4) **Do everything in love**

Without love, it all means nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 - If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Use your gifts and your freedom not to please yourself but to serve each other.

1 Corinthians 12:7 - Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

1 Corinthians 10:23-24 - "Everything is permissible"-- but not everything is **beneficial**. "Everything is permissible"-- but not everything is constructive. ²⁴ Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

Sex, idolatry, differences of conscience,

Put the reputation of God and the church over your own selfish interests.

John 13:34-35 "A new command I give you: **Love one another**. As I have loved you, so you must **love one another**.³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you **love one another**."

Oh, that we would be known by our love!

Paul's heart was that Christ would be formed in them, that they would become mature. Be on your guard, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, and be known for your love!

Ephesians 3:14-19 - For this reason I kneel before the Father,¹⁵ from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.¹⁶ I pray that out of his glorious riches he may **strengthen** you with power through his Spirit in your inner being,¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,¹⁸ may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge-- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God