

## 1 CORINTHIANS 16:13-14

### INTRODUCTION

In these verses Paul gives the Corinthian church five final commands, they are all very positive commands and to be honest they are in contrast to the many negative commands that Paul has had to give throughout the letter. I want to use these five commands in order to review the book of Corinthians as a way of reminding us of the varied teaching that we find within this book.

#### 1. BE ON YOUR GUARD (v 13)

The Greek word for “guard” means to watch or to be awake and sometimes it is translated as being alert. The word is used frequently throughout the New Testament and is often concerned to instruct Christians to be spiritually awake or on guard as opposed to being spiritually indifferent and naïve.

It is used frequently concerning the Lord's Second Coming; Christians are to be expectant and watchful when it comes to the Second Coming. Sadly this instruction was very necessary for the church at Corinth because often they were not awake and on their guard. They allowed pagan ideas and habits to destroy their faithfulness to God and their fellowship with each other. They substituted godly wisdom for human wisdom and as a result they were divided, immoral, envious and were confused about marriage, divorce and singleness. They misunderstood and misused spiritual gifts and became unloving towards one another.

You see when a church is not on its guard then false teaching and ideas can come into the church so that the church replaces God's wisdom as it is found in His word with human wisdom. When that happens then it will not be long before there is confusion and immorality and jealousy within the church and it will not be long before the church begins to display lack of love for its fellow members.

Satan is the enemy of God's church and he prowls around like a lion looking for an opportunity to cause havoc and ruin within the church. We must be on our guard because the devil is waiting to pounce if given the opportunity but also we must be on our guard against apathy and indifference within the church.

It's so easy to become indifferent and apathetic for those sins are so often unnoticed for they begin within our hearts. They often only display themselves when it is too late to do anything about them. Apathy can dress itself up as over familiar with spiritual things or else it presents itself in reasoned arguments but in truth although we can so easily make excuses for our lack of spiritual zeal often the truth is that apathy and indifference has set in.

Therefore what happens is that we begin to miss our bible reading and prayer times and excuse ourselves because of our health problems or because of family commitments and so on. We excuse our failure to be as keen within God's service as we once were with age or health and family problems etc.

But we must be on our guard for what sounds so plausible can be a deception of our hearts when in fact what is really going on is that we have become indifferent to the things of God which leads to apathy. So let us all be on our guard and take action when false teaching or false practices raise their heads or when apathy and indifference sets in.

## 2. BE FIRM (v 13)

Not only must the church at Corinth be on its guard and its failure to do so has led to many problems but also they are to stand firm in the faith. The church is to know what it believes and then stand firm on its beliefs. Paul is not talking about faith in the sense of trusting but of faith as a body of truth that they believe and practise. One of the tactics of our enemy is to get churches to question and even abandon clear gospel principles. Satan can never remove saving faith from us but he does all that he can to cause confusion and to disrupt God's church through a failure to believe clear truths from God's word.

In Corinth with all its emphasis on wisdom, God's truth it seems was often under threat. The church had fallen for the attractions of human wisdom and it seems that human wisdom was being put on the same level as God's truth and even above it. Otherwise the church at Corinth would not have tolerated the divisions and the immorality and the jealousy and the pride that was clearly demonstrated within the church.

The church had faulty views on idols and marriage and sex and the reason for this is that they had not stood firm in their faith. They had abandoned the teaching on which their church was founded. Today the church of Jesus Christ is constantly being attacked on its beliefs. For example what we believe about God and Jesus is under attack today? If we say that Jesus is the only way and that there is only one true God and one true faith then we will be attacked and ridiculed for what some see as bigoted views. Sadly some churches and Christians have compromised their beliefs so that we now have an ecumenical movement littered with Christians and with Christian churches that once believed clear gospel truths but have now watered those down in the name of some movement.

How can that be when in that same movement, there are people who are not Christians and churches that do not believe the bible? That sort of thing happens when Christians and churches fail to stand firm in the faith. My dear friends we must know what we believe and we must hold dear to it. If I was to ask you what are the core truths of Christianity then could you tell me?

Would you be prepared to defend such beliefs even if everybody else thinks that we are narrow minded and bigoted. For that is what it means to stand firm in the faith. But we can only do that if we are well taught in the word of God, we are to examine our beliefs in the light of God's word and change them if we find that our beliefs are actually faulty.

We must pray for ourselves and for our church and churches in general that in a world where Christians are increasingly being marginalised and where clear gospel churches are being encouraged to compromise that we will stand firm in our faith. We must encourage one another to stand firm for we will find ourselves increasingly being expected to compromise on matters relating to our faith.

Subjects like Jesus and salvation and the church and the Lord's Day, marriage and sexual purity are all subjects that are increasingly being attacked today. We have had it easy in our country as Christians but it seems to me that the tide is turning and biblical truths that once were believed in our land have long been abandoned and the campaign to get others to abandon them has been going on for some years.

My dear friends let us stand firm and let us encourage one another to stand firm. Pray for one another and for the pressure we are under to compromise and pray that our church will remain true to God's word to the central truths of the gospel that we love and practise.

### 3. BE COURAGEOUS (v 13)

Paul encourages the church to be courageous and that is exactly what they need if they are going to stand firm in their faith. The Greek word actually means, "To be manly" and probably is thinking of it in the sense of being brave and courageous. Some people believe the idea is that of being mature rather than childish in the faith. It could be that both ideas are in Paul's mind.

The church at Corinth lacked courage to stem the flow from the false teachers and to exercise church discipline against the sexually immoral and to take steps to deal with those who were abusing spiritual gifts within the church. It seems that they allowed almost anything to take place within the church including division, immorality of the worst kind and even lawsuits against one another.

The leaders and the church as a whole needed to be courageous in order to take action to prevent such things but they were so spiritually weak that they did not have any moral or spiritual courage to act. They could not even control the Lord's Supper so that there was order and decorum. All of this lack of courage stemmed from the fact that they were not mature in their faith but were in fact spiritual children.

Children are afraid of the dark but adults aren't, they are mature to know that darkness cannot hurt you. Children do things that can hurt them and are dangerous to them because they are immature to know the dangers of what they are doing. But adults do not do the same things they know the dangers of such things.

But when you are a spiritual child and have not yet grown up then you fear things and people you do not need to fear and you do things that will hurt you, things that are spiritually dangerous. That is why immature believers will never be courageous because they do not see the dangers.

This is one reason that we are told that Elders within churches must be mature believers, a new believer is not able to see the dangers and therefore will not act to stop the danger from taking root within the church. Corinth was full of immature believers which is why it allowed human wisdom to dictate and it allowed divisions to flourish and it not only allowed sexual immorality but they were proud of it.

Immature believers take one another to court, abuse the Lord's Table and are all for pushing their spiritual gift forward at the expense of unity within the church. It seems there was no one mature enough to be courageous and try to stamp out the many wrong practises that were going on within the life of the church. The challenge for us is to develop our walk with God so that we are mature in our faith, mature enough to stop error and mature enough to take action against false teaching and false practises that may creep into our church.

We need to pray for our leaders within our churches that God will give them courage to act when necessary for so often action to prevent wrong beliefs or wrong practises is misunderstood and can cause conflict and difficulties for leaders within the church. Pray for wisdom that leaders may know when to act for there are many times when things are not as clear-cut as we might think.

We need to pray for maturity so those leaders are able to stop error and act accordingly before it is too late. That is not always easy, for error is often very subtle and disguises itself so that it looks and sounds like the right thing. Only mature and wise leaders will be able to spot error and act accordingly. But it is not only the leaders responsibility to be courageous we all must be courageous.

It takes courage to expel the immoral that refuse to repent from the church, especially as they will be people who we have fellowshiped with us for years and people who we consider to be our

friends. Only those of us in this church who are mature will be able to take the right action when necessary to prevent error from entering and flourishing within our church. It is the mature who know and can understand the dangers; therefore we all need to be mature in our faith and courageous in our actions.

#### 4. BE STRONG

In the Greek the tense of this verb is what is known as passive and it means something that happened to you. So Paul is really saying, "be strengthened." We cannot be strong by ourselves it is God's task to strengthen us for his work.

Our task is to submit ourselves to God and to obey Him and in doing so we will find that God gives us inner strength so that we are able to be strong in the Lord and in his grace (Ephesians 6:10 & 2 Timothy 2:1). We need this strength for if you have been a Christian for any length of time you will know the battle that is constantly waging within us between your sinful nature and God's Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is in control of our lives if we are Christians, but the sinful nature hates that and does everything it can to take charge again. If we are going to resist these sinful inner desires and cravings then we need to be strengthened by the Lord, we need to rely upon His power and His Spirit to help us to stay true to the Lord.

Now the Corinthians church gave in far too often and too easily to their sinful nature so much so that Paul called them "worldly" (3:2) which is why there was so much quarrelling and jealousy and division among them. O they thought of themselves as godly and spiritual and in some cases more spiritual than others especially if you had the gift of speaking or interpreting tongues.

It was because of their weakness and their failure to be strong that they abused one of the greatest privileges that any Christian can have in partaking of the Lord's Supper. Yet one of the greatest failures of those that are not strong in the Lord and are not depending on the Holy Spirit for their daily strength is pride.

The Corinthians thought they were strong and Paul has to spell out the dangers of such an opinion by giving examples from the Old Testament and then telling them to take heed lest they also fall like the Old Testament believers (10:1-13). But this strength comes from the Lord only when we are self-disciplined. When we are dealing with sin that is exposed within our lives when we are seeking to live lives that are self-controlled, that is controlled by the Holy Spirit. Strength that comes from the Lord involves self-sacrifice from us so that we are spending time with God daily.

It involves self-denial, refusing to do or think things that will ultimately feed our sinful nature. It involves a constant dependence upon God, through prayer and it involves a stepping out in faith for we are only strengthened by God as and when we need it.

The Christian who never seeks to live for God in this world will know little of this strengthening that comes from him but the Christian who actively serves God will know and enjoy the strength that comes from God through the work of His Spirit in our hearts. Paul declared that he could do all things through him who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13) and of course he is talking there about the Lord Jesus.

So if we are going to be strong as Christians we need God strength. Therefore we must submit to Him, obey Him, and daily depend on His Spirit to guide us and to empower and strengthen us for his work.

## 5. BE LOVING

This last command is the most comprehensive and without it the others could make us contentious and inflexible. So the church at Corinth is told to do everything in love. You see love complements all these other commands and qualities. For love is a softening principle.

It keeps us from becoming hard and domineering, it keeps us gentle and considerate and it keeps us from becoming smug and self-righteous. Love is what the Corinthians needed most and what all believers of all ages need most. The church at Corinth was so intent on using their God given gifts that they had completely forgotten about love.

That is why Paul had to write chapter 13 to show that without Christian love their gifts were not just meaningless but harmful. It is God given love for the Lord and for others that will keep us on our guard. We will not want to be caught out because we will not want to let the Lord of others down. We will want to protect God's truth from error and protect God's people from sin and because of our love for God and His people we will be on our guard against all our enemies.

It is only Christian love that will help us to stand firm in our faith. If we truly love the Lord then we will want to discover his truth in his word. So we will be careful to study his word and seek to understand it with the help of the Holy Spirit. It will be love for our fellow Christians that will enable us to teach them God's truth and to encourage them to stand firm against those who seek to entice us into compromise or error.

If we don't love the Lord or His people then we will not be worried about God's truth or whether His people uphold it or not. Also the way that we stand firm against error must also be done in love because so often we can come across hard and uncaring which will not enhance gospel truth at all.

Only a true biblical love will enable us to be courageous and act for truth whenever it is necessary. Church discipline when necessary will not only be exercised but will be done with a loving heart and with right motives and the best of intentions in order to try to win and correct the erring brother or sister.

Finally true love for God will mean that we daily rely upon him to strengthen us in order that we might resist the pull of our sinful nature and might willingly submit and obey the One who strengthens us. Think how different all churches would be if we did everything in love. Think how Corinth would have been different. They would have thought about themselves in a right way instead of being proud.

They would have been humble depending upon God's wisdom rather than earthly wisdom. Would the church have been so divided if there were genuine love for God and others? Would the church have been proud of the sin of immorality within its membership? Would there have been so much abuse of the Lord's Supper?

Would their worship services not have been more reverent and orderly and would the Lord's Supper not have been more thoughtful and more meaningful if only they had shown love to their fellow believers.

Finally would the gifts that were many within the church at Corinth not have been of great benefit to the church as a whole instead of being used to enhance one's ego.

The answer to all those questions is a positive yes and our church and all churches would be better places if more love were shown for the Lord and for all God's true people.

Therefore let us be on our guard and stand firm in the faith. Let us be strong and courageous people but most of all let us be loving people so that everything we do and say will be motivated by love and tempered with love.

Amen