

1 CORINTHIANS 16:15-24

INTRODUCTION

In many ways these verses that we are looking at flow out of and illustrate the command to love given by Paul in verse 14. Paul's closing words are not simply niceties that Paul threw in at the end of his letter as a matter of custom or courtesy. As much as any other part of Scripture they are part of God's word and are given to us for a purpose.

God wants us all to learn some important lessons about love and Christian fellowship from these verses. The greatest need as we saw last time within the church at Corinth was for an all-embracing love, a love that would really change the church and their fellowship one with another. I suppose you could say that this was Paul's parting shot; this is his last appeal to the church that he himself loves.

The structure of this section is very simple it starts in verse 14 with a command to love and ends in verse 24 with the assurance that they themselves are loved by Paul (v 24)

1. LOVE IS MANIFESTED IN EVANGELISM (v 15)

The members of the household of Stephanas were the first converts in the whole region of Achaia, which was the southern province of Greece in which Athens and Corinth are located.

Stephanas was one of the few persons in Corinth whom Paul baptised personally (1:16); he was visiting Paul at the time that this letter was being written (v 17) and probably along with Fortunatus and Achaicus delivered the letter that the church at Corinth had sent to Paul (7:1). His household would have included his family but also his servants as well.

The word translated "first converts" is the word first fruits, which was the part of the crop that blossomed first and was therefore harvested first. It was a promise of more to follow, when you saw the first fruits you knew that the crop was doing well and soon more fruit would follow.

Therefore the conversion of Stephanas and his household was a sign to Paul that God was ready to reap an even greater harvest of souls at Corinth and throughout the rest of Achaia. A belief that was indeed realised as the church here at Corinth is clear evidence of that belief.

But why is Paul telling us this. I think it is an illustration what genuine love does for when we love people then evangelism takes place and when it is done in genuine love then conversions can be expected. A church that loves is a church that will reach out to its community just as a Christian who genuinely loves will reach out to others in love with the gospel.

The early church expressed its love in its evangelism that was true of the church at Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 1:3 & 8). You see if we do everything in love (v 14), if love is all pervading in our life then one of the activities that we as a church and individually will get involved in is evangelism. We will seek to reach out to people with the love of God and must expect and pray for fruit from such an activity.

This love of course is not something that comes naturally to us but it is only because we were first loved by God that we are able to love at all (1 John 4:19). Paul was a great evangelist because he was compelled by Christ's love (2 Corinthians 5:14). You see love that gives us a desire for evangelism or any other manifestation of God's love cannot be generated by ourselves.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to produce love within us and to direct our love towards others and through it to produce fruit for God's glory. A truly loving church will be a church where evangelism

is at its heart, but we must be honest and say that so often evangelism is seen as a duty rather than being motivated by genuine love.

That is why as a church and individually we need to ask God for a love that will move us to the extent that it moved Paul. A love that will reach out to everyone with the gospel of God's love in the knowledge that God will use our efforts which are done out of love to add and build up his church.

2. LOVE IS MANIFESTED IN SERVICE TO OTHERS (v 15)

Another mark of doing everything in love is to serve others in the church. But this is not something that was done occasionally or causally by Stephanas and his household for we read that they "devoted themselves" to this service of the saints. The word "devote" means to appoint or assign or ordain. It is a word that means to be assigned to a particular task.

But notice that Stephanas is not appointed or assigned by the church for we read that they devoted themselves, in other words they assigned themselves to this task of service. It is of course important and necessary for the church to assign or appoint people to certain tasks and those people are to be devoted to their tasks. But no one needs to be appointed by the church for this task of serving others.

Every Christian who genuinely is manifesting God's love will be someone who will be devoted to serving others in the church without appointment from the church. To be devoted to serving others means that we give ourselves to that task of meeting the needs of others. Such people see needs that must be met and go and do it without looking for someone to ask them or appoint them to that task.

To be honest in every church most needs are met by the love and care of other Christians who are devoted to helping and caring for their fellow Christians and not by some organised and appointed activity of the church. So if someone is lonely or ill or in need of support in some way; then loving people do something about it without being asked or appointed to that task.

People devoted to serving saints, phone other saints up or visit them or do something practical for those who need it. In the church they look out for the ones that no one is talking too after the service and go and speak to them without being asked to do so.

To be honest the ones who are appointed to office or given jobs or responsibilities within the church are the ones who have practically demonstrated their love for the saints through their service to them. Someone is not appointed a deacon or Elder within any church that is not already involved in serving others within the church.

This is because genuine Christian love is a serving love, it's a love that demonstrates the love that Jesus had and of course we know that Jesus came into our world to serve and be served. Christ's greatest act of service is of course his act of self-giving on the cross for sinners like us.

Therefore any Christian who wants to be like Christ and possess Christ's love within his heart will be someone who seeks under God to serve others and is devoted to this task. Anyone can serve other Christians in the church occasionally but only those who are compelled by the love of Christ are able and willing to devote themselves to such a task. Paul was someone who was devoted to serving God's people; he was always looking for ways to do so and was always depending on the Lord to open up doors of service for him. He was never content that he has done enough or done his bit for the church he was always willing and looking to serve more. The reason why he was like that is that he was compelled by God's love for him.

When Paul thought about what God had done for him in Christ then he was moved by such self-giving love to give himself in serving others within God's church. After all if Christ died for such people, if he was willing to make such a sacrifice for his church and serve them in such a costly way then should not Paul and Stephanas do likewise and What about us?

Should the cross of Jesus not also move us to serve others devotedly? If we have drifted in our service or gone cold or perhaps we have never started to serve in this way then look again at the cross of Christ. See the love of Christ for sinners and then ask God to give each one of us a love like that so that we will be devoted to the service of the saints.

3. LOVE IS MANIFESTED IN SUBMISSION TO OTHERS (v 16)

Another way of manifesting God's love is to submit ourselves to others and in doing so demonstrate Christian fellowship. We are told in the Bible that we are to submit ourselves to the appointed leaders within the church but we are also to submit ourselves to one another (Ephesians 5:21).

Therefore the church is to submit to Stephanas and his household and the others who are setting a godly example within the church by their love and service to others. To be honest submission to one another within God's church is the key to unity and fellowship with one another. Submission is about placing ourselves under others and we will never learn to serve anyone unless we are willing to place ourselves under them.

Our world is all about being above people but the church of Jesus Christ is all about submission. It is probable that the church at Corinth did not show any respect or submission to Stephanas and perhaps he told Paul this when they met but Paul now urges the church to display their love for one another through submission.

Love's first thought is whom can I submit to and serve and the only way that submission will take place is if we think of others better than ourselves. Stephanas and his household were a great example of people who submit to others and Paul is now encouraging the church to follow their example. Christians are not to fight for their rights, or demand respect but instead they are to submit to one another in true love, which of course will lead to service towards one another.

One reason why so few Christians within God's church are willing to pay the price of service is because so few are willing to submit to others. Why is it that many churches cannot find people suitable to be Deacons or Elders or youth workers etc.? It is because there is a great lack of submission in churches for submission always leads to a willingness to serve others.

Let someone else do it is often the cry from our churches and sadly that is what people do and sometimes it means no one does it or someone does it who shouldn't do it. We are so glad that our Saviour was willing to submit and serve others. He submitted Himself to his father and entered our world in human flesh. He submitted himself to people while upon this earth even to the extent of letting mere human beings put the Son of God to death.

But why did he do that? Why did he submit? The answer is so that we could be forgiven and reconciled to God through His death and resurrection on our behalf. Therefore let us follow the example of Christ and his many servants who express their love in submission to others, which will express itself through service.

4. LOVE IS MANIFESTED IN FELLOWSHIP WITH OTHERS (vs. 17-18)

Another outworking of genuine love is true friendship and fellowship. Paul was grateful that his three friends listed here had come to Corinth to be with him and to refresh him. These friends had supplied what was lacking in Paul's life which was contact with his friends at Corinth.

These Christians who came to see Paul were his friends, they came to see him no doubt to encourage him and the fact that they came to Paul was enough for Paul to say that it was refreshment to his spirit. The spirit of the church at Corinth was also refreshed by the fact that they had no doubt sent these men to Paul. Therefore that sense of isolation and perhaps tension was over.

One of the finest compliments that can be paid to any Christian is to say that he or she is refreshing to be around. This is a mark of true friendship and fellowship within churches. True friendship and fellowship seeks to build people up, it can heal our wounds and can comfort us in our sorrows and can be such a great encouragement to us.

But fellowship with others is also preventative for one of the surest ways that Christians get into spiritual trouble is by neglecting fellowship with others. God has made us as human beings in such a way that not only do we need a relationship with the Lord but also we need relationships with one another.

Isolation is bad for Christians, it leads to depression and insecurity for we all need one another and we need friendships and we need fellowship. We have all experienced the difference a call from a Christian friend can make. Perhaps we are spiritually down and low and someone calls either by phone or better in person and after we are finished speaking to them we feel refreshed within our souls.

Although their call may have been inconvenient for us at first when they leave we are so glad they called, we feel so refreshed by them. They may not have done anything in particular but the fact that they called and showed they cared and spoke about the Lord and Christian things with us refreshed us so much.

God chooses to meet our needs through our brothers and sisters in Christ and although we like to think of ourselves as self sufficient and independent in reality we all need one another and we need fellowship with one another. You see that is why coming to church is not about us or about what we get out of it but it's about others.

Our attendance and our fellowship with others refreshes people which is why when we are not present for whatever reason then the church is a poorer place because we are not benefiting from the fellowship that those missing Christians bring.

So if we are to do everything in love then we will look out for others, we will seek to have fellowship with others, call with others and seek to refresh others with our presence and with our words and actions.

If we do that then we will be refreshing others but we will also be refreshed ourselves. Therefore let us be active in our fellowship one with another, true fellowship cannot be organised by any church we might be able to facilitate it but true fellowship takes place when Christians meet together and when Christians love and care for one another.

Therefore let us learn these lessons and "do everything in love," which means being involved in evangelism, serving one another through submission and finally fellowship one with another. I'm

sure if we loved as we ought to love and as we long to love then all these things would happen within our own church in a greater measure than they happen now.

Therefore pray with me for God given love to pervade all our lives so that it will be expressed in all these ways and in many others ways as well as we will see next time.

Amen