



1 Cor. 16:13-18

Christ's Devoted Servants

13 Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong.

14 Let all that you do be done with love.

15 I urge you, brethren -- you know the household of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints --

16 that you also submit to such, and to everyone who works and labors with us.

17 I am glad about the coming of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, for what was lacking on your part they supplied.

18 For they refreshed my spirit and yours. Therefore acknowledge such men.

Paul has been writing what was probably one of the most difficult letters of his life, he was writing to a church that was in crisis, in every sense. There was no unity and mutual love in the church, instead they were breaking up into individual cliques and parties. Theologically, on several issues they were in danger of leaving the faith once for all delivered to the saints and becoming heretical, morally they were fostering a spirit of permissiveness that was causing them to tolerate gross immorality. In terms of their worship, they were becoming addicted to excitement and showy sign gifts, and were turning up their noses at the solid preaching and teaching of Christ crucified. They were showing themselves to be desperately immature, not able to absorb the solid meaty that they should have been craving. They were a sensual people addicted to sensation, and showed themselves to be carnal and not spiritual. Way back in chapter 3 Paul had lamented: ***“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal.”***

As I said when I began this series, it’s almost like Paul was writing to the church now rather than back then. But brothers and sisters I hope that that shows you that the problems we have in the church today are nothing new, and the answer to the problems of the Corinthian church are also the answers that we desperately need to be applying today.

Paul has been telling them from turning from serving self, to serving Christ and his people and from doing what seemed right in the eyes of the culture or their own eyes, to doing what the Lord commands. He wants them to return to the love and the single-hearted devotion they showed to Christ when they were first converted.

And so in the closing he gives them a summary of what they need to do, and then gives them a sermon illustration, he actually points out people in their midst who were worthy of imitation. Its almost like he is saying, this is what you should be doing, and you want to know what it will look like when you are doing that? Well you’ll look like these people. He had said to them in chapter 11 ***Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ*** but obviously he couldn’t always be there, so he points out others worthy of imitation as well.

So what are the qualities in this conclusion that he says the Corinthians need?

1) **Watchfulness** – Be vigilant in the faith, be on guard! The word he uses here *gregoreite* is the same that is used for watching for the second coming by Jesus. Stay awake, don't get lulled to sleep, watch out for your enemy the Devil. And he moves on to tell them what in particular they need to be watchful for in particular and that is bad doctrine, false teaching.

2) **Stand Fast in the Faith** – As we saw, this was a people who were beginning to question even the bodily resurrection, false teachers had grown up in their midst who were drawing them aside after worldly and deceptive philosophies. We saw the beginnings of what 50 years or so later would blossom into the Greek heresy of Gnosticism. No doubt they had their own equivalents of what we see everywhere in the church today; people writing books and conducting bible studies and starting up their own ministries that draw the saints away from the truth. Today its worse than ever because of the speed at which bad doctrine can be disseminated – blogs, radio, TV. You can write, publish, and distribute a new book every month these days – and there are some guys who are doing exactly that.

He calls them back to the faith that he preached, the unchanging faith that Christ's apostles set down that faithful deposit of doctrines that isn't constantly moving back and forth like the waves of the sea. Jude calls this: "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."

As Charles Hodge put it: *“Do not consider every point of doctrine an open question. Matters of faith, doctrines for which you have a clear revelation of God, such for example as the doctrine of the resurrection, are to be considered settled, and, as among Christians, no longer matters of dispute. There are doctrines embraced in the creeds of all orthodox churches, so clearly taught in Scripture, that it is not only useless, but hurtful, to be always calling them into question.”*

Hundreds of years earlier God had said the same thing through Jeremiah to another generation going off after false teachers, false prophets who contradicted the teaching of the world: *“Thus says the LORD: “Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it; Then you will find rest for your souls.”* That advice is just as sound today as it ever was.

3) Be Brave, Be strong – I love the way the KJV renders BE BRAVE – QUIT YOU LIKE MEN, it is a phrase that conjours up images of soldiers, who tenaciously and unflaggingly fight to hold the line. It conjours up the reply of John Paul Jones when asked to surrender his ship: “I have not yet begun to fight!” As Leon Morris pointed out *“They must be like responsible adults. Moreover they are engaged in a desperate strife with the forces of evil, and it is imperative they play the part of men.”* Be strong he says, stand against the tide of the culture and of deceit.

Brethren, if there is one thing I wish the modern church had more of, apart from LOVE amongst the brethren, it would be this spirit - more maturity and an unwillingness to compromise the truth.

4) The *thing they most desperately need though, and without which nothing else will happen is Love.* Let all things be done, *en agape*. Not just *with* love, but *in* love. It is love to Christ that will keep them in the faith, and it is love for the saints that will keep them persevering with one another. In Christian marriage counseling, the one thing I point out, the one deficiency that can never be overcome or worked around, is a lack of love, for one another, and most importantly for Christ. Every other problem can be fixed, but where there is a lack of love for Jesus, and through him, nothing can be done. That is why I try to concentrate on the nurture of that first and foremost.

It is the same in the church. Where there is bad doctrine, it can be fixed, where there is a lack of maturity it can grow. But if we have not love for Christ, we are not Christians.

John 13:34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." So Paul sets before them as an example the household of Stephanus, the Stephanus family. And he points out that not only were they the first converts – he mentions baptizing them in 1:16 they were also worthy of emulation because they had shown this love of Christ by devoting themselves – the word he uses is

ἑταξαν Literally “addicted” themselves – dedicated or devoted themselves to serving others.

Now we know of many things we can become addicted to, but of how many people can we honestly say “he or she is addicted to serving Christ and his people”

Would that we all had such an ADDICTION!

How did they become worthy examples - They did not appoint themselves to office, or demand a place of priority they became examples in their lowly service – literally Diakonia – from which we get the word deacons. They should submit themselves in particular to this kind of person, let them be your examples, the people you look up to and follow. And similarly all who labor like them, for they too are doing that same kind of work that Paul did, as devoted servants.

He goes on to comment on how they and other worthy men Fortunatus and Achaicus, had visited him in Ephesus, probably delivering the letter he was responding to and letting him know what was really going on in the church.

The loved the brethren so much they were not content to let the church die. This is a mark of a true servant

He says the reason why he rejoiced in their presence was, that they supplied what was lacking on the part of the Corinthians; or rather, the want of you - I missed you, but they brought a little bit of Corinth to me.

Therefore they refreshed Paul – he had been restless with lack of news, and by bearing his instructions back to Corinth they had refreshed them – helped to remove the heavy burden of sin and error that was pressing down the congregation.

They love you, therefore acknowledge their service, be grateful to them of it. It is not often that this is the case. Those who labor the hardest and do the “dirty work” dealing with the bitter problems seldom get the most acknowledgement. We reward the ear ticklers, the superstars, the people who thrust themselves forward. But these three showed more of the self-denying spirit of Christ than any of them.

What we need today is men like these in the church! Men and women who labor to bring the aroma of Christ with them wherever they go. Men and women who are small in their own eyes, but who serve a mighty Christ. I sometimes wonder if we don't see more conversions these days, because we are so big that we block all view of Christ.