



I've been a pastor now for a total of 18 years, and I grew up in church my entire life. I've seen a lot. I've read about a lot. I've had a lot of conversations with people. Do you know that the struggles of Corinth in many ways still happens in today's churches? I'm grieved time-and-time again when I hear of verbal or sexually abusive pastors and leaders. I'm grieved when I sit with people wanting to become members of Ventura and they share with me the hurt they experienced in their previous churches. In small or large ways, we can all relate to the pain we feel when we think about certain church experiences, can't we? Maybe you, too, left church for a time because the Christians you were with didn't really act like Christians. They were hypocrites. Maybe even over this last year you've felt hurt with relationships in our own church family.

I'm talking about this right now because the main idea of the sermon today is this: **Christians ought to devote themselves to loving service within the community of believers.** You may be wondering, "How do you get that from these verses?!" Yes, these final verses seem to contain a hodgepodge of statements that are somewhat related, but clearly they're simply concluding thoughts. But these concluding thoughts reveal more of the everyday life practice of Paul and even the churches. The idea of community, unity and love are beautifully expressed in these final verses. And these verses serve as an example to the Corinthians, and to us, how we ought to live and behave with fellow believers.

Instead of sinfully judging or running from the church, Paul reveals a more beautiful picture. But before I get into that picture, I want to share a few ways I think that we who have been hurt can sinfully respond. These responses are appropriate when there's an emergency, but if we live in these modes, it's not healthy for us or the church. I'm sharing this to create a contrast with the verses we're looking at and also to help you in case you may need to repent. First, we can **isolate** like some who say, "I'll solve the problem. I just won't ever enter a church building ever again." Others of us might be more subtle. Instead of isolating, we can **regulate**. We'll gather with a church, but we won't open up. I still remember hearing a story from an elderly gentleman who told me when he was younger (probably 20's or 30's) that he expressed certain struggles to his pastor and the next week, he was used as a sermon illustration. This elderly gentleman, who is now in Heaven, told me he would never confess his weaknesses to others in the church. But he was faithful in gathering with the church. Another response is that we can **separate**. Those who isolate do indeed separate, but when I say separate, I mean that they turn from any group that is like the one who hurt you. So, I've had conversations with people who have said they were hurt in a Baptist church and they'll never go to a Baptist church. I've heard of others who grew up in a Reformed church and because of their experiences they switched to Baptist.

I do not believe that living in these tendencies is healthy. I would go so far as to say that living this way in the church is not honoring to Christ. In our desire to self-protect, we accuse others of hypocrisy and then we become hypocrites, too. "Wait! How do I become the hypocrite?!" Because you've forgotten you're weak, too. And you've forgotten that not only did Jesus save you by grace, but he probably saved those others by grace, too. Now, let me be the first to say that I can understand the tendency to self-protect. I've done it many times in my life when I've been hurt by others in the church. But I believe

Jesus has given us a better way – a way that glorifies God and grows us more in the love and grace of Jesus. So, let's jump into the final verses of 1 Corinthians and see the love that Paul expresses in the community we have because of Jesus.

1. The Reality of Christian Community.

Look at all the people and people groups listed in these verses. First, we have Paul who authored this letter. Then we have the Corinthians who are the recipients. Then we have the household of Stephanas. We also see Fortunatus and Achaicus. Then we also have the churches in Asia, Aquila and Prisca (and their house church).

Just by looking at these names and the way in which Paul writes about them, we clearly see Paul emphasizing that the Corinthians are in relationship with all of these people. Do you realize, Ventura, that if you have turned to Jesus for forgiveness of sins and wholeness with God, that you are in communion with the Triune God and also in communion with all others who have turned to Jesus as well? Do you know that?

I've heard Christians point at other Christians and say things like, "I'm not like them" or "I don't associate with those Christians." And, what's sadly interesting to me is that people can feel the same way in their own physical families. How different are you from your brother or sister? Do you sometimes not want to talk to them or be around them? But does that change the reality that you are their brother or sister? My point is this: The Christian family is not one that we choose. It's a family that God chooses for us! Whether it's the universal church (which is all believers throughout all time) or it's the local church (which is professing Christians who commit together), God has placed us together to magnify him and reveal that we are united because of Jesus.

So, look at these name and groups again. We have the local church emphasized here when people talks about the household of Stephanas. They were the first converts in Achaia. Achaia was the region where Corinth is located, and in chapter one of this letter, Paul speaks of Stephanas being a part of the Corinthian church. His family were the first converts. The idea in the Greek is that they were the firstfruits of Achaia. If you remember that agricultural illustration, the firstfruits spoke to the reality of a harvest. So, Paul is saying they were first and the Corinthians were more of the harvest that came. But they are all part of the same harvest.

Then Paul talks about Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus coming to visit him. All of these individuals were from Corinth and visited Paul on his journeying, and Paul says they "made up for your absence, for they refreshed my spirit. . . ." A few guys from the Corinthian church visited Paul and Paul was refreshed by their presence, just like the Corinthian church is refreshed by these brothers in their own gatherings.

What amazes me is that some can read Corinthians thinking Paul was a hard-nosed guy and was no-nonsense with the Corinthians, but Paul loved this church and was refreshed by them. He wanted to see them in person and he welcomed three of their members – being encouraged by them. Notice that! Even with all the issues in Corinth, Paul still welcomes and is encouraged by believers from the church. Why? Because they're family and they have the Spirit in them.

But the Corinthian's community isn't just within the local church and then to Paul. The community extends to all believers. Verse 19 has the churches in Asia. Aquila and Prisca, who were a part of Corinth, left and had a church elsewhere, too. And Paul says all of these people are greeting the Corinthians. One

pastor and commentator speaks of these relationships and wrote, “. . .it is extraordinary that this type of meaningful network was created without regard for business, politics, race, class, etc. That would have been absolutely unheard of in that day” (Um, p. 299).

In our day, we have Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, texting, Zoom, and more. We can, in certain ways, connect with people all over the world at the touch of a button. Yet, studies also indicate that we have lost relational connection with people in our digital age, too. We settle for the impersonal. Many don't go deep relationally. Yet, look at these verses with Corinth. There is depth. There is joy. There is refreshment of *soul*. There are hearty greetings. There is *real* relationship, and this is how it ought to be for us, too, Ventura. We ought to care for our brothers and sisters in Christ around the globe. We ought to reach out to them, pray for them, write them letters if we can. We are part of the same family. We are part of the same body.

Ventura, this shows Corinth that they're part of something bigger than themselves! This shows us that, too! Christ saved us and brought us to God, and has made us part of his mission in this world to glorify God until Jesus comes again. Let's not be so self-focused that we forget that we have a mission *with God's people*. This should encourage Corinth and any other reader of this letter. But there's a real interesting statement to me in verse 20. Paul talks of the other churches in different areas greeting them, and then he says “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” Why does he say this? I think it's because sometimes we can value *others* more than our own people. Clearly Corinth had issues. But if they're going to love Christians out there in the broader world, they must love those closer to them. The same is true for us, Ventura. We can't say we love Christians if we can't love the Christians we're closest to in proximity. So, are we going to separate, isolate, or regulate ourselves around the people we're closest to or are we going to welcome one another with a holy kiss? Now, by the way, that was custom. We don't have to kiss! But it was a custom of welcome and acceptance. Because of all God has done for us in Christ Jesus, we are to treat one another with the grace and love that we've been treated. Like Paul says to Ephesus: ³² **Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.** ¹ So, if you are a follower of Jesus, now the question is, “How do we live this way?” That takes us to the second point.

2. The Characteristics of Christian Community (vv. 13-20).

Let's read verses 13-14: ¹³ Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. ¹⁴ Let all that you do be done in love.²

These are basic characteristics that should be part of all local churches. First, be watchful. What does that mean? Watchful for what? Many times in the Scriptures, to be watchful was to be always on alert, knowing that Jesus is coming again. I think this absolutely fits the context here, coming off of Paul's teaching on the future resurrection. As a church, we should be reminding ourselves of the Kingdom that is to come. As we focus on Jesus' return, we are shaped in how we think about this world. The anxieties and cares of this world can't choke out our faith if we know we live for another King who always cares for us. I know how easy it is to slip into only thinking about the here-and-now. I know how often I need to be reminded of the Kingdom to come. I pray about this consistently in my life to re-focus my attention on what matters for eternity so that I can live now for God's glory. May we all be watchful and may we encourage each other in this.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Eph 4:32.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 16:13–14.

Second, stand firm in the faith. This is a command for the entire community. What does this mean? Essentially, it means to keep the main thing the main thing. The faith is specific. It's not "a faith." Paul isn't saying, "Just have some kind of faith in something." It's "the faith." The faith once delivered to the saints. What is this faith? It's not Judaism alone because in the first century, and even today, many physical Jews reject Jesus as the Messiah – as well as the doctrine of the Trinity. Thus they reject the New Testament as Scripture. *The faith* is referring to the body of truth that speaks to God's glory in Jesus by the Spirit. The faith is *dependence on Jesus*, as the Savior, Messiah and King. Jesus, who lived the perfect life in the place of sinners, died being punished by God on the cross with the punishment sinners deserved, and rising from the dead – conquering sin and death. And this Jesus is coming again to bring cosmic reconciliation! THE faith is centered around Jesus. Keep the main thing the main thing.

The Corinthians were standing firm on questions and squabbles. And, that's often what we do, too. Sometimes we stand firm on important issues, too, but not central issues – and thus we divide from fellow believers. I get the temptation. But Paul here, and throughout all his New Testament letters, calls the churches to stand firm in *the* faith. Keep focused on Jesus and the gospel! Determine to know nothing but Jesus and him crucified.

Third, Paul says to act like men. What does this mean? Is he calling the women in the church to be masculine? No. Earlier in this letter, he says that the Corinthians were like infants, drinking spiritual milk. They needed to grow up and eat the spiritual meat. I believe this is Paul's point here. Grow up, Corinth. God has promised believers he will grow us. So, in the reality of his promises of grace to us, let's grow up. Let's be spiritually mature.

Fourth, we are to "be strong." Right here, you can say, "Ok, I'll prove to God I'm strong." That's not the point. We can only "be strong" in the strength of his might. Paul says in 2 Corinthians that when we are weak, we are strong. Only in recognizing my inability and depending on the Lord am I actually strong! That's what Paul has urged the Corinthians continuously with in this letter. Depend on God, mature and find strength! The same is true for us!

If we put these two verses together, I would say we could put it all under the heading of **Keep Jesus central**. This is the first characteristic of a Christian community. But we find some other things, too in these verses.

Another key characteristic of Christian community is to **Love one another**. Read verses 15-18 and 24 with me: ¹⁵ Now I urge you, brothers—you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints— ¹⁶ be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer. ¹⁷ I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, ¹⁸ for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.³

Do you see the love? Do you hear it? The greetings and care are expressed. The *love* is clear because after all, Paul has already spoken of the great thing missing in their church? Remember chapter 13? The greatest of these is love? And now Paul is showing what love looks like in practice, and how he dearly loves them. Can you say that about fellow Christians here at Ventura? Can you say that about Christians

³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 16:15-18, 24.

elsewhere? Do you love them? Do you work for their good in the Lord? Well, this leads me to another characteristic of Christian community.

Submit to one another. Look at verses 15-16 again: ¹⁵ Now I urge you, brothers—you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints— ¹⁶ be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer.⁴ The household of Stephanas serves the saints (which is simply a term for those who have trusted Jesus). Every Christian is a saint because that means we're set apart for God.

But Paul says the house of Stephanas serves, but he then says to the Corinthians to be subject to people like them. Isn't that interesting? There's this reality that Stephanas in some ways is submitting himself under the Corinthians as a servant, but they are to honor Stephanas and his household. This is how the church is to function, too. We are to all be servants of one another. As we're told elsewhere, we are to "esteem others as more significant than ourselves." And then we serve and submit as needed.

A final characteristic mentioned in these verses is to **Honor one another**. The end of verse 18 says to "give recognition to such people." We ought to give honor to whom honor is due. We ought to be able to point out examples of those who are depending on the Lord and serving the saints. We all need examples. We need flesh and blood examples. To recognize people like this, encourages individuals that the Lord is at work and it helps others to see how we are to live and act. While all humans are imperfect, we can praise the Lord for his work through them!

These are characteristics of Christian community. I pray that we would grow in these. But the only way we can grow in this is if we understand the final point:

3. The Foundations of Christian Community (vv. 21-24).

Read verses 21-24 with me: ²¹ I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. ²² If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come! ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. ²⁴ My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.⁵

The longing is for Jesus to come again. And then we have a phrases before "Our Lord, come!" and after it that delineate what makes for Christian community. If someone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed.

Wow, that sounds harsh, doesn't it? But the point is that if a person doesn't love the Lord, you can't force them to love him and that person is not a part of Christian fellowship. Therefore, let them continue that way. But for those who have Jesus' grace. Those who love the Lord, may Jesus' grace continue to grow them.

Therefore, Paul says his love is with them all *in Christ Jesus*. **The foundation of Christian community is Grace and Love through Jesus.** We have a community here not because we're smart or have it all together. It's not because we're a certain ethnicity or we've risen to a specific economic level. We exist because God has showered us with grace in Jesus and now he has given us love for him and love for one another.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 16:15–16.

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Co 16:21–24.

I pray this is true of you. And, if you have no love for Jesus, I hope you would be concerned about that. Please ask someone what it means to be a Christian. Jesus is coming again and all those who trust Jesus will experience eternal grace, but those who reject will be judged for their sins for all eternity. Why reject the Love that took sin's punishment?

Christians ought to devote themselves to loving service within the community of believers. Now, take time to pray and ask God to help you to respond to his truth today.

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