

LIVING AND LOVING

SERIES: LIFESTYLE ISSUES IN THE CHURCH

by Doug Goins

A question occurred to me as we were worshiping in the first service: "Do I really, wholeheartedly love the people sitting around me in church this morning?" Assuming that the answer to that is yes, the next question is, "What does that look like? How do I express my love for these folks?"

Around Valentine's Day my wife Candy and I began co-teaching the Song of Solomon in the Old Testament to the newly-marrieds class here on Sunday mornings. You probably know that beautiful love poetry about the marriage of Solomon, the king of Israel, to his wife Shulamite. Then last week Candy and I celebrated our twenty-second wedding anniversary. So for the last month we've had an ongoing conversation about what it means for us to live together in the Lord in a loving marriage relationship, about the nature of a loving lifestyle of intentional, sacrificial commitment.

I found a wonderful quote from C. S. Lewis in his book *The Four Loves*. He talks about the event of falling in love:

"In one high bound it has overleaped the massive wall of our selfhood; it has made appetite itself altruistic, tossed personal happiness aside as a triviality and planted the interests of another in the centre of our being."
(1)

That's what it means to really love another person.

We're going to study the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in 16:13-24. Paul, this great-hearted shepherd of the church in Corinth, is making his final, very loving appeal to a church that has a lot of problems. His closing concern for Corinth is that they experience a vibrant and loving community life. This passage describes relationships marked by the kind of selflessness, altruism, and concern for others that C. S. Lewis expressed. In the last message (Discovery Paper [4540](#)) I quoted 2 Corinthians 5:14, where Paul described what motivated him and his apostolic associates in ministry. He said, "...Christ's love compels us...." (NIV). There is a sense in which the verses we'll look at in this message summarize what the compelling or controlling love of Christ looks like in the life of the church.

The theme of love in the body of Christ is like an arrow that shoots all the way through our passage. It starts in verse 14: "Let all that you do be done in love." Verse 20: "Greet one another with a holy kiss." That's the affection of love expressed among believers in the body. Verse 22: "If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed." There Paul is concerned about hypocrisy, about love that is not genuine in the body of Christ. Verse 24, where Paul himself brings his own pastoral greeting: "My love be with you all in Christ Jesus."

Now, if you've been studying through this very long letter, you know that most of it is in the form of rebuke and correction. Chapters 1-14 dealt mostly with bad behavior among believers. Chapter 15, the great resurrection chapter, dealt with bad theology. Even chapter 13, the beautiful love chapter, was written because Paul had to deal with lovelessness and insensitivity in that body of believers. Yet this letter comes out of deep, loving concern for and commitment to these people. It's like God's love for us. The writer of the book of Hebrews says, "...Those whom the Lord loves He disciplines" (12:6). So this is very loving discipline from the apostle. Remember how Paul began his letter. Even though he had hard things to say, in the opening paragraph he wrote, "I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you...." (1 Corinthians 1:4-6). We see from Paul that love may have to be tough-minded at times, but it's always hopeful, confident, optimistic, and very grateful.

EXHORTATIONS FOR A LOVING COMMUNITY LIFE

Verses 13-18 are marked by a series of commands that Paul gives. If we want to have vibrant love life in our community, then we need to pay close attention to the call that we're going to hear from the apostle in these verses. In verses 19-24 he talks about some relationships that evidence vibrant community life among believers.

Let's read verses 13-14 where this list of apostolic exhortations begins in this call to vibrant, loving community life:

Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.

This challenge to be alert, to be on guard, is like a call to wake up, to come to life, to pay attention to what's going on around us spiritually instead of being indifferent, apathetic, or spiritually listless. That challenge appears twenty-two times in the New Testament. If we're not wide awake as we live out our Christian life, if we're taking things for granted spiritually or lightweighting the Scriptures and their claim on our lives, then we're making ourselves very vulnerable--to satanic attack, to the temptation to sin, and to false teachers who aren't going to tell us the truth about the love, grace, and call of God in our lives. Spiritual vigilance is absolutely necessary for vibrant life in the church.

The second command is to "stand firm in the faith." That's not the faith of trusting, it's the faith of truth. You could translate it "Stand firm in the content of the gospel." It's what Jude described as "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Remember how confused these Corinthians were about what was true and what wasn't true. Like the Ephesians, they were being "carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14). The nineteenth-century Princeton scholar Charles Hodge said, "We should not consider every point of doctrine an open question." Vibrant church life in Corinth was threatened because they wouldn't take a firm stand on many things. Too much was very tentative and relative for them doctrinally.

In the third command Paul, using the parlance of his day, challenges these Corinthians to "act like men." In antiquity most people associated courage with the manliness of a battle-hardened soldier. Mature believers, men and women alike, are controlled by the Spirit of God and not by anything else. We have a growing confidence in the Lord himself, in his sovereignty in our lives. We're also becoming more courageous in the face of opposition and difficult things that challenge us and confront us. Again, we've seen the opposite in the Corinthians' immaturity. Back in chapter 3 Paul called them babies, and in 14:20 he challenged them, "Brethren, do not be children in your thinking but in your thinking be mature." So another mark of spiritual vibrancy and vitality is courageous spiritual maturity at work.

The fourth command in verse 13 is to "be strong." Now, we can't make ourselves spiritually strong, and the Scriptures never ask us to do that. The verb here is in the passive voice. Literally it says, "Be strengthened." We talked about Timothy in the last message. Remember his shyness, his struggle to believe that God really could accomplish things through him. So Paul wrote to him, "...Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 2:1). That's very similar to what Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus: "...Be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might" (Ephesians 6:10). Both of those are also in the passive voice. We're called to submit ourselves to the Lord so that he can strengthen us.

Paul bases the imperative on the indicative rather than the subjunctive because he is so convinced that God will make us strong, that he will finish the building process in us. In the opening paragraph to the letter Paul wrote, "Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end...." (1 Corinthians 1:7-8a, NIV.) God calls us to be strong, and the promise is that he will make us strong "so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his son Jesus Christ, our Lord, is faithful." (1 Corinthians 1:8b-9, NIV.) We can count on that.

The final command in those opening two verses is to "let all that you do be done in love." It is to put others above ourselves. This verse echoes chapter 13. In his letters Paul always establishes love as a motivating force for ethical behavior. The "all that you do" applies to the Corinthians' feuds over favorite leaders, their struggles with Paul personally and with his authority, their marriage relationships (chapter 7), the spiritually strong people's domination of the spiritually weak people in the body (remember Paul's challenge, "Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies" [8:1]), the abuse of the poor at the Lord's supper by the wealthy people in the church, and their failure to serve and build up the church (chapters 12-14). Paul's point is that when the love of Christ really controls us, we won't live out abusive, insensitive relationships with one another because we'll respond to Jesus' desire to express his life through us.

SERVING LEADERS, LEADERS SERVING

In verses 15-18 there are two imperatives that are asking the same thing. We're being asked to respond submissively to leadership, but it is to be authentic, spiritual leadership. Look at how natural authority flows out of loving service. We're asked to submit to people whose lives authenticate the role of leadership that God has given them.

Now I urge you, brethren (you know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints), that you also be in subjection to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labors. And I rejoice over the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus; because they have supplied what was lacking on your part. For they have refreshed my spirit and yours. Therefore acknowledge such men.

These three brothers from the church in Corinth, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, who were visiting Paul in Ephesus at the time he was writing this letter, probably delivered the letter from Corinth that he was in part responding to.

For Paul, these men embodied the essence of verse 14. Apparently the entire family of this one man Stephanas evidenced a loving lifestyle of intentional, sacrificial commitment to the church in Corinth. Twice in this paragraph Paul commands his Corinthian brothers and sisters to voluntarily submit themselves to the leadership that these men exercise. The first instance is in verse 16: "...Be in subjection to such men...." The second is in verse 18: "Therefore acknowledge such men." There's a great word play between the last clause of verse 15 and the first clause of verse 16, and it comes out well in the New Revised Standard Version: "...They have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to put yourselves at the service of such people...."² The acknowledgment in verse 18 includes both a recognition of loving service and the accompanying submission that's called for in verse 16.

I looked these men's names up to see how they were referred to in other places in the New Testament, and there is no hint that these men were officers in the church; they aren't mentioned as pastors or elders or deacons. But what they did was exhibit a quality of life that leaders in the church in any age, men and women alike, having any ministry responsibility, are to have. The kind of spiritual leadership that we must exercise is always based on servanthood. That was very difficult for the Corinthians. They were stubborn, competitive, and arrogant. I think Paul believed that if the Corinthians listened to these three men, God could use them to bring order out of the chaos that was so typical of church life in Corinth.

What were the specific qualifications for leadership that these men exhibited? This is a very important checklist for any of us in the body whom God has called to leadership or who might aspire to be used by God as a leader in the church. Three statements stand out.

The first statement is in verse 15: "They have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints." Stephanas and his family together loved the work of ministry, and they served the body on their own initiative. That doesn't mean that they forced their way into leadership. Rather, whenever they saw a need, they went to work to meet it without waiting to be asked. They were solution-oriented instead of problem-oriented, and they probably didn't care who got the credit when ministry was accomplished.

The King James Version translates the verb "devoted" as "addicted." (3) They were serving in ministry so consistently, so regularly, that it was like an addiction; they were hooked on ministry. The writer of Hebrews praises this kind of perpetual service of love: "For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints" (Hebrews 6:10). This addiction or devotion to ministry is not affirming compulsiveness or drivenness in ministry. It's not being a workaholic for the Lord. Remember, we are controlled by the love of Jesus Christ, that internal direction that leads us into ministry.

The second qualification for leadership is in verse 16. He speaks of those who help in the "work and labors." The word "labors" literally means "toil to the point of exhaustion." Servant leaders work hard in the service of Christ. They work hard for the good of the church, expending themselves. We're called to hard work if we aspire to leadership in the body. I love how William Barclay summarizes verses 15-16: "In the early church willing and spontaneous service was the beginning of official office. A man became a leader of the church, not so much by any man-made appointment, as because his life and work marked him out as one whom all men must respect. All those who share the work and toil of the gospel command respect, not because they have been appointed by a man to an office, but because they are carrying on the work of Christ." (4)

The third qualification for servant leadership in the body of Christ is summarized in verses 17b-18a. These three men were committed to personal relationships. "...They have supplied what was lacking on your part. For they have refreshed my spirit and yours." As leaders, these three men were encouragers. Paul missed his spiritual family back in Corinth. He longed to hear from them and know what was going on with them. These three men showed up and told him all the stories. They filled in the blanks of what God was doing in people's lives. They lifted his spirits with their presence. They had the same effect on the believers in the church in Corinth. Paul says they brought the joy of companionship to him. They got close to him. They were personally involved with him.

It is true in any age and any setting that the best spiritual leadership is warmly relational. All of us in leadership ought to be approachable, engaging. We have no right to be aloof or distant, and we ought to take the initiative in our leadership of encouragement as these three men did in the body in Corinth.

As I reviewed these commands, I realized that I must apply them personally to myself. If we care individually about the vibrancy of our life here, if we want a love life that really honors Christ and folds people in, then we've got to start looking at ourselves. I have no right to look at anybody else. I can't evaluate any other elder or pastor in this body. I must ask myself in the light of these statements, "Am I spiritually alert to what God is doing around me? Am I standing firm in the faith? Do I know what I believe? Am I hanging on to it? Am I a person who is growing in maturity and courage? Am I allowing God to strengthen me, or am I still trusting my own natural strength and resiliency? Is it the love of Christ that controls me in what I do in this body, or is it something less than that? And finally, do I live submissively toward the people who work hard in the church, regardless of their title or official office or role, who pour their lives out for the good of the church and the work of the kingdom?"

OPEN HEARTS, OPEN HOMES

Now beginning in verse 19, we come to the closing greetings of Paul's letter. He describes some more wonderful patterns of Christian behavior. The exhortations we've already looked at and these greetings to come really give us a beautiful picture of Paul himself and of the warm relationships he built with people in the early church. Oftentimes Paul is pictured as a tough old swashbuckler adventuring across the Roman Empire. But in the process he fell in love with people, connected with them, and sustained those relationships for the long haul. Look at some of these evidences of vibrant, loving community life in verses 19-20:

The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Most of the letters of this period would end with a number of greetings like this, because mail was so intermittent that they never knew when the next letter would get through, so they wanted to get in all the greetings they could when they knew that the letter was going to be shipped.

The first kind of love we see here is love from church to church. He brings greetings from the churches of Asia, and then in verse 20, "all the brethren" refers to the congregation of the church in Ephesus. The love of Christ in our life as a congregation produces love for people we don't know. And Paul is not mouthing religious platitudes here. He's not stretching the truth to impress his readers. Apparently these churches that he had traveled to in Asia and this congregation in Ephesus were passing along genuine salutations. They were honestly concerned about the welfare of their brothers and sisters in Corinth whom they had never met.

When we as a church are committed to allowing the life of Christ to control us and express itself through us, then we'll have the same kind of concern for other churches, people in different circumstances and places, people we may never have the privilege of personally fellowshiping with. We can pray for those people. We can give to meet needs that they may be experiencing. We can encourage them.

Next he focuses on a wonderful couple, Aquila and Prisca. In other places Prisca is called Priscilla. Aquila and Priscilla are a wonderful Jewish husband-wife team who were dedicated to ministry. Their lives were intertwined with the apostle Paul's. Like Paul, they were tentmakers, and that was probably how they met initially in Corinth. They had lived in Rome at one time, but had been driven out of that city by Jewish persecution.

Priscilla must have been a remarkable woman, because in the six times the couple's names appear in the New Testament, four times Priscilla's name appears first. From that we get the impression that she was probably the stronger of the two. She was a devoted teacher, leader, and witness for Christ.

But Priscilla and Aquila worked wonderfully well together as a team, serving the Lord and helping Paul. When Paul moved on from Corinth to Ephesus, he took them with him to help plant the church in Ephesus. And they were such a dynamic duo in ministry in Ephesus that he left them behind to help lead that little church when he headed on to Antioch. It was during that time that they poured their lives into this young preacher Apollos, who was a little confused about the nature of the gospel. Priscilla and Aquila together helped Apollos come to a full and complete understanding of the grace of Christ.

The reference here in verse 19 emphasizes their lifestyle of hospitality. Their home was always open. They were leading a church in their home in Ephesus. And like the three brothers mentioned in the preceding verses, Aquila and Priscilla involved themselves in people's lives. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he talks about how Priscilla and Aquila put their own lives at risk to help him out of a very difficult situation (we don't know what happened). We also know from Paul's letter to the Romans that they returned there and ministered, again hosting a church in their house. Wherever they went, their home became a center for ministry.

Paul's very last letter before he was executed was to Timothy, his young charge. Timothy was back in Ephesus then, pastoring, and Paul sent greetings to Priscilla and Aquila, who had gone back to Ephesus to help Timothy in his ministry just as they had helped Apollos and the apostle Paul himself. In terms of how they lived their lives, how they viewed ministry, how they used their home, this couple is a wonderful model of flexibility, seeing their vocation as furthering the work of Christ. Their marriage relationship was wonderfully transparent. They were committed to the premise that marriage meant ministry for them. Their home was wonderfully attractive, a place of worship, hospitality, and refuge in what was then a very dangerous world.

I don't want to name names as the apostle Paul does, but I am so grateful that so many couples and singles here at PBC lovingly open their hearts and homes as Aquila and Priscilla did. They have been wonderful models for Candy and me during our twenty years here. In the way they live their lives they have warned us against a family life of self-indulgence and self-protectiveness. They have encouraged us as this dear couple encouraged churches in Rome and Ephesus and Corinth to

actively live out our love for people, to make ourselves vulnerable, to live openly and honestly, to understand that our home is not our castle but a place for community life and ministry.

The last statement of verse 20 is "Greet one another with a holy kiss." In the body of Christ there ought to be wonderful, genuine, spontaneous expressions of affection between brothers and sisters in Christ. In Paul's day that holy kiss was a kiss on the forehead or the cheek, from men to men and from women to women. I wondered why Paul would command the church in Corinth to do this. But remember what they were like as a church-*cliquish*, having "in groups," exclusive, feeling superior. Paul is saying no. We're all on level ground at the foot of the cross, and greeting one another in this warm expression of affection wipes out those barriers.

Today we might kiss and hug one another, and that's wonderful. Or we might share a holy handshake. Whatever it is, we need to define ways that we can honestly express the affection that we feel for one another in Christ. We live in a day of tremendous personal isolation and insulation. In most of our churches, demonstrations of affection are sadly lacking. The danger most of us face is showing too little rather than too much affection. One of the problems in a church as big as PBC is that we too easily allow strangers to remain strangers. The shy person who comes here isn't often noticed. And some people, sadly, just don't want to experience real fellowship. But if there really is genuine love here, then we're going to find ways to make friends out of strangers and show affection to our Christian brothers and sisters.

The last few verses show us how passionate Paul is about this issue of love in the body. He takes the manuscript from his secretary to whom he's been dictating, and he signs his own name, and then he personally, in longhand, adds a little final note. We need to imagine the apostle almost trembling, he feels these things so deeply.

OBEDIENCE, THE TEST OF LOVING THE LORD

Look at verses 21-22. He once again says they must be loyal, wholeheartedly obedient, devoted to Jesus Christ. And they ought to be longing for Christ's return.

The greeting is in my own hand-Paul. If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed. Maranatha.

This is a final call to obedience for the Corinthian Christians. But instead of calling for obedience to apostolic authority, Paul puts it in the ultimate language of Christian obedience: "If anyone does not love the Lord...." That covers the entire letter. To insist on human wisdom over and against the gospel of Jesus Christ is not to love the Lord. The same is true for living in incest, attending idol feasts, and so on down the list of problems we've studied. The ultimate issue for Paul is not their obedience to his letter but their love for the Lord Jesus, or their lack of love and their failure to obey the word of Jesus Christ. Disobedience is to reject Christ, and Paul says the result is that they will place themselves under the curse, the *anathema* or the wrath of God. In the words of 2 John, "Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God...." (verse 9). John goes on to say such a person should not be welcomed into the Christian fellowship.

The final exhortation is given in the confident hope of Jesus' return. That's the word "Maranatha." It means "Lord, come quickly." This verse is a marvelous example of tough love, speaking the truth but confident that the Lord Jesus will return and set everything right.

A LOVING SHEPHERD

Paul closes the letter in the last two verses with a beautiful prayer of benediction. I was struck by the loving shepherd's heart that comes out in this prayer. Verses 23-24:

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.

He closes it with the same spirit in which he opened it. In 1:3 he greeted them, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Despite the strong language of verse 22, Paul has to close with a positive, prayerful note of encouragement. He's convinced of the effectiveness of the grace of God at work among them. Grace will triumph.

This is the only one of Paul's letters that he ends with an affirmation of his love for his readers. It's amazing when you think of the church to which he expressed it. This was the church that resisted him the most, that was the most fractured in its love life. But he says, "I love you"-not just in himself but because of the relationship with Christ that has transformed his life. Out of that he can express his love for the church, because he knows that's the only kind of love that lasts, the only kind of love that makes a difference, the only kind of love that's tough enough to survive in the face of the personal rejection and insult he has experienced from this church.

The question I asked at the beginning was, "Do I love the people seated around me in church this morning?" I realize that I

will love them to the extent that I have fallen completely in love with the Lord Jesus Christ. If we have problems in our relationships of love, our relationship to Christ is at stake. Remember how Lewis defined what it means to fall in love: "In one high bound it has overleaped the massive wall of our selfhood; it has made appetite itself altruistic, tossed personal happiness aside as a triviality and planted the interests of another in the centre of our being." (1)

Those are all humanly impossible apart from the work of Jesus Christ in us, changing us.

NOTES

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, © 1960 by Helen Joy Lewis, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., New York. P. 158.
2. New Revised Standard Version, © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
3. *The Holy Bible*, King James Version, © 1970, Thomas Nelson Inc., Camden, NJ.
4. William Barclay, *Letters to the Corinthians*, © 1954. The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA. P. 186.

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