

09-11-16 – Love Never Fails – 1 Cor. 13:4-8

Paul's Girl: Paul's girl is rich and haughty; My girl is poor as clay.
Paul's girl is young and pretty; My girl looks like a bale of hay.
Paul's girl is smart and clever; My girl is dumb but good.
But would I trade my girl for Paul's? You bet your life I would.

ONE evening just before the great Broadway musical star, Mary Martin, was to go on stage in South Pacific, a note was handed to her. It was from Oscar Hammerstein, who was on his deathbed. The short note simply said: "Dear Mary, A bell's not a bell till you ring it. A song's not a song till you sing it. Love in your heart is not put there to stay. Love isn't love till you give it away." (James Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited*)

The church in Corinth was the most dysfunctional church in the New Testament. Yet if you look at the list of their issues, they are just like our 21st century church issues.

Corinth was a very prominent city in Greece. It was rich, but had no self-control. It was located on the isthmus (a narrow piece of land that joined two seas. (**see map**)). This brought much traffic from trade ships that used this city as a stop-over and a means to get their wares from one sea to the other. It was a short-cut port. Corinth hosted the "Isthmus Games" every year, and people from all over the world came to compete on their journeys to bring their goods.

The wild, anything goes, lifestyle in Corinth was well known. In fact, if someone were to say you live like a Corinthian, everyone would know what they meant. Not a good reputation. It meant they lived a wild and unrestrained lifestyle and didn't care who knew it.

Paul established this church in Corinth during his second missionary journey. He preached the Gospel to the Jews in the area, but they rejected his message. So, he reached out to the Gentiles. They responded and believed and received Jesus. The Corinthian church was born and grew. Paul remained with them for about 18 months before moving on in his mission trip. He taught and preached establishing a somewhat well-grounded church in Christ. He went to Ephesus and remained there for three years. During this time, Paul received a letter from a household in Corinth reporting their concerns about the health of the church. It seemed that things just fell apart there. The church was running amuck and needed some serious refocusing.

Paul also receive a report of some behaviors that were of concern and some questions that the believers there wanted to ask Paul to explain since time had transpired since he set things up. His response to all this is the First letter to the Corinthians. It is a corrective letter. His approach to their issues was done in love and gentleness without compromise.

Paul was concerned if the Christians of this church were living as Corinthians or as Christians. This was Paul's motivation as he wrote both first and second Corinthians – both corrective letters dealing with real life issues that still plague the church today. They are problem solving letters.

1 Corinthians deals with interchurch problems. Paul dealt with church issues such as: disunity, immorality, lawsuits against each other, confusion about marriage, abuses of the Lord's Supper, and lack of discipline in finances.

In the middle of all this correction, Paul speaks or writes about true love – Ch. 13 – the famous love chapter. Love we need in dealing with difficult people and circumstances.

READ: 1 Cor. 13:4-8 – Love Never Fails. – (from NIV)

“Christians are to live more like citizens of Heaven than citizens of earth, which requires us to exhibit healthy hearts and united churches.”

(Understanding the 66 Books of the Bible, Ray Stedman, Key Thought, p. 200).

Love is the remedy for any dysfunctional church. We'll come back to this later.

Paul told them in **1 Cor. 2:4-5**, ***“My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”***

Yet after a few years, the church deteriorated into the state that needed Paul's correction by remote response in a letter.

The city was *“devoted to sensualism and pleasure,”* nothing censored, no holes barred, raw and blatant. They had the same problems then as we have today in our post-modern, post-Christian age... *“an age of Tabloid TV, radio talk shows, rampant prostitution, pornography, and homosexuality. Sound familiar? Corinth was most like today's America. Nothing is really new today. “Corinth was a resort city, the capital of pleasure-seeking in the Roman Empire.”*

(Adventuring Through the Bible, R. Stedman, p. 573).

It was a beautiful city where obscenity and sensualism were not just tolerated, but approved by the leaders of society. It was a source of income and fame.

1 Cor. 1-11 – deals with the carnalities of the church – What is wrong.

1 Cor. 12-16 – deals with the spiritualities of the church – what to do to fix things.

The church in Corinth was the biggest problem church of the New Testament...

First Paul explains the issues as reported to him, then he prescribes a plan to correct the problems as a Christian body of believers – never condemning anyone, but lovingly correcting.

From the beginning, he reminds them of their calling in God. **1 Cor. 1:2-3**

“I am writing to God’s church in Corinth, to you who have been called by God to be his own holy people. He made you holy by means of Christ Jesus, just as he did for all people everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.”

All believers are called to live a holy life, a sanctified life. It was true then, and it still true today. **Holiness must be our goal!**

1 Cor. 1:9 – “God will do this, for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” NLT

Let’s look at few of the issues Paul dealt with in this powerful and corrective letter...

Divisions in the church:

This is the first problem Paul addresses, and it is of utmost importance to him. The church, and any church is to have unity within. That doesn’t mean everyone has to agree with everything. It does mean that ultimately we all need to put Christ and our worship first above all things. The church in Corinth was divided, and it was crippling the ministry there. Division is crippling to any ministry anywhere. So Paul addresses this issue first.

In Corinth divisions resulted from the culture around them infecting the church. Every church needs to constantly evaluate their environment in light of the changing times, but no church should become indistinguishable from the world around them. Holiness is being separated to God. Corinth was a central city of Greece. The Greeks were very cerebral. Everything was about knowledge. The people gathered around famous philosophers and listened to them speak for hours so they could gain knowledge.

This mentality came into the church with the new believers in Christ from that culture.

1 Cor. 1:10-12 *I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.* ¹¹ *For some members of Chloe’s household have told me about your quarrels, my dear brothers and sisters.* ¹² *Some of you are saying, “I am a follower of Paul.” Others are saying, “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Peter,” or “I follow only Christ.”* NLT

Paul deals with this issue head on from 1:10 through 4:21. He devotes quite a bit of time and writing to address this. Divisions or factions are a cancer to any church. Notice Paul also tells where he got this information – from members of Chloe’s household – no anonymity. If you’re going to complain about something important, you should be ready to openly admit it.

Notice also that Paul doesn’t condemn anyone, but rather he states the facts of the complaint, and he explains why this is detrimental and how to remediate the problem.

Just the way they chose which philosophers they wanted to follow before they believed, they now brought that mind-set into the church by choosing which religious leaders they wanted to follow. One group thought they were the ones who really had it all together. In their pious arrogance they say they follow only Christ. They may have been the most dangerous of all, full of spiritual pride that clouded everything they thought and did.

Paul explains in love that all human wisdom is useless and always was. True insight comes from the Holy Spirit, speaking to us through His Word. It takes a break-down of our wisdom to accept the things of God and His Gospel. Only then can we receive the Word and become His.

1 Cor. 1:18 - *The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God.*

Philosophers have their place in the world and are definitely very intelligent, but true wisdom within can only come from the Word of God alive in us.

**Prov. 9:10 - *Fear of the LORD is the foundation of wisdom.
Knowledge of the Holy One results in good judgment.***

The source of the problem of divisions in the Corinthian church was not that they disagreed about the differing points of view of the different spiritual leaders of their time and church. The real source of their division issue was their pride, carnality, and fleshy desire to have preeminence and to be idolized and praised. Which group was right? Which group was more spiritual? As long as they held this attitude they would never grow spiritually. There was no love in this approach. The problem is solved when they learn to love one another even if they disagree on details. Love never fails.

Scandals and Sexual Immorality in the church:

Scandals were a result of carnality in the Corinthian church. The open sexual immorality that was allowed in the church in Corinth was a blatant sin. Paul cites a relationship between a man and his step-mother. The church did nothing to stop this behavior. Sexual immorality was accepted and tolerated (today's buzz word). Paul is very strong on his recommendation regarding this situation. He uses the one example to show what the church should do as far as discipline. All sexual immorality falls under this category – whether a scandal erupts or it's kept a secret from leadership. The wide variety of behaviors categorized as sexual immorality were prevalent in this culture and society. We have the same things going on today. You name it and it went on in Corinth: prostitution, pornography, adultery, pre-marital sex, homosexuality, etc. In fact, sex was a part of their worship experience at the temple of Aphrodite. There were 10,000 temple prostitutes available so people could come and worship the goddess properly.

Paul instructed the church to expose the sin and those involved giving them a chance to repent and truly belong to God. If they don't repent, then they should be asked to leave the church.

Why so strong? The new believers thought they could do anything they wanted because they were free by grace. Paul says, "Not so!" He explains the seriousness of sexual sins this way.

1 Cor. 6:13b-20 - But you can't say that our bodies were made for sexual immorality. They were made for the Lord, and the Lord cares about our bodies. ¹⁴ And God will raise us from the dead by his power, just as he raised our Lord from the dead.

¹⁵ Don't you realize that your bodies are actually parts of Christ? Should a man take his body, which is part of Christ, and join it to a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ And don't you realize that if a man joins himself to a prostitute, he becomes one body with her? For the Scriptures say, "The two are united into one." ¹⁷ But the person who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him.

¹⁸ Run from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body. ¹⁹ Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, ²⁰ for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body. NLT

When we received Jesus into our hearts and lives, He implanted the Holy Spirit within us. That means we take Jesus with us everywhere we go and into anything we do. We can't escape His presence. He knows everything about us and is with us when we sin. Most sin is outside our bodies, but sexual sin is against our own bodies and against the Spirit of God within us. This is why it is so serious in Paul's eyes and should be in ours as well. Run from Sexual Immorality.

Again the real answer to this is LOVE. If we truly love the Lord and ourselves, we can flee from sexual sins. Think about His love for us. Even though He is with us in our sin, He still offers forgiveness and restoration. Love never fails.

Starting in Ch. 7, Paul addresses various questions that were sent to him regarding worship and the Christian life. He starts his answers with, "Now regarding..." in the NLT. He gives instructions about Christian marriage in Ch. 7. In Ch. 8-10 he addresses Christian freedom.

In Ch. 11 Paul gives instructions on public worship and the proper attitude regarding the Lord's Supper, which was being abused in this church. People who came early and in higher positions grabbed the bread and wine and gorged themselves, even drinking too much wine. Those who arrived later had little or nothing left for them. Paul laced into them for this selfish act. He told them to eat at home if they are hungry. This wasn't a free meal; it is a sacrament. The focus must be on Jesus and what He did and commanded the church to do in remembrance of Him. They were all about themselves and lost the true meaning.

In Ch.12-14 he instructs on Spiritual Gifts, again something abused by this church. They were looking at the gifts as signs of higher spirituality. Their pride moved them to desire gifts they thought more prestigious. Paul had to instruct them that the gifts were given by the Spirit of God as He sees best and were to be used to build up the church not tear it down with levels of gifts. Use what you're given to benefit others not to build up yourself.

1 Cor. 12:18-20 – *But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. ¹⁹ How strange a body would be if it had only one part! ²⁰ Yes, there are many parts, but only one body.* NLT

Every believer has been given a spiritual gift, whether you have discovered it or not yet. No gift is more spiritual than another. No particular gift marks maturity more than another. Use your gift to serve in the church – not to show others how spiritual you are. Be a humble servant.

Ch. 13 – the famous Love chapter – is showing the qualities of true Christian love that must be at the center of everything in the church and in the Christian life. Love is not just a warm-fuzzy feeling. Paul shows us that it is not all emotion either. Love is a decision to become like Christ. It can be applied to everything we do as a Christian and a church member. Here's our text again from the NLT...

1 Cor. 13:4-8 - *Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud ⁵ or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. ⁶ It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. ⁷ Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance. ⁸ Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever!* NLT

Ch. 15 instructs about the truth of the Resurrection of Christ from the dead and its impact to our lives and the hope we have for the future.

That is the First letter from Paul to the Corinthian church in a nutshell. I encourage you to read the letter in its entirety and see how love is central to each issue and its corrections.

People do not become believers and instantly become Christ-like. Sanctification is a process – a life-long process. Some mature faster than others; some not so much. It's not up to us to judge others, but to love them where they are in the process. The Corinthian church had some immature believers among them. They brought their baggage into the church with them, and it caused quite a disturbance in the force. The only antidote was correction in love. If we can learn to love like this, it will be a great help in dealing with troublesome people and situations.

Love never fails.

I want to close by reading last Friday's Daily Bread.

What Matters Most

As Jesus's beloved disciple John grew older, his teaching became increasingly narrowed, focusing entirely on the love of God in his three letters. In the book *Knowing the Truth of God's Love*, Peter Kreeft cites an old legend which says that one of John's young disciples once came to him complaining, "Why don't you talk about anything else?" John replied, "Because there isn't anything else."

God's love is certainly at the heart of the mission and message of Jesus. In his earlier gospel account, John recorded the words, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (JOHN 3:16).

The apostle Paul tells us that God's love is at the core of how we live, and he reminds us that "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (ROM. 8:38-39).

God's love is so strong, available, and stabilizing that we can confidently step into each day knowing that the good things are gifts from His hand and the challenges can be faced in His strength. For all of life, His love is what matters most. ☉

BILL CROWDER

**Thank You, O Lord, that Your love is rich and pure,
measureless and strong!**

God's love stands when all else has fallen.

1 John 4:9

**He sent his one
and only Son into
the world that
we might live
through him.**