DO EVERYTHING IN LOVE

1 Corinthians 16:1–24

Key Verses: 16:13,14

“Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.”

What motivates you? For most of us, that’s a complex question. Some people say, “I’m just not motivated.” Depression or despair can rob us even of the desire to live. But then, we can start getting motivated with something as simple as just growing hungry. We also get motivated by fear, or guilt, or by a sense of honor or duty. Pride, or selfishness, or greed, or revenge can be lurking behind our motives as well, and often we’re not even aware of it. At the end of this letter Paul tells the Corinthian Christians, “Do everything in love.” It sounds nice, but how do we really do that? In this closing chapter Paul shows us some practical examples of how to be a loving person in our church community. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living words today.

In this letter Paul has been addressing some serious ethical and theological issues in the Corinthian church. Now he concludes with practical matters about a special offering, his own travel plans, guests, treatment of church workers, and then final greetings and blessings. But a theme in the midst of it all is love. He repeats the word love in chapter 16 three times. Paul mentioned love first at the beginning of chapter 8. Then he devoted an entire chapter to it in chapter 13. Now in his concluding instructions, love is still on his mind.

Look at verses 1–4. Paul begins with the phrase “Now about…” It’s the fifth time in this letter he uses this expression. Most likely, he’s responding to another question the Corinthians had written about in their previous letter to him (7:1). They must have heard how Paul was collecting an offering and wanted to know how they could participate. So Paul responds with specific instructions. First he says the purpose of the offering was “for the Lord’s people” (1). According to verse 3, it would be given to Christians in Jerusalem. Because there were so many Jewish Christian widows there (Ac6), and because Jewish Christians found it hard to find jobs among their fellow Jews due to persecution, the financial situation of Christians in Jerusalem was dire. So Paul told each of the Corinthian Christians to start setting aside money, every Sunday, in keeping with their income, saving it up, so that when he arrived, the collection would be ready. Saving up and giving money would show a real commitment, and real love. Since Corinth had a booming economy, these Christians had the means to help their fellow believers far away, even though they didn’t know them personally. But it wasn’t just about financial need. Paul was working to build spiritual unity among all the churches, Jew and Gentile. He saw this specific financial need as a chance for both sides to express real love and gratitude for one another, and to respect each other as God’s precious people because of their faith in Christ. Paul also wanted letters of introduction and specific delegates to be chosen to take the offering to Jerusalem. It was to make it crystal clear that the money was not being stolen by anybody but was being used for what it was intended. Paul was willing to join the team and deliver the offering in person, which he eventually did (cf. Ac20:4,16,22,35; 21:17–19; Ro15:25–28).

Look at verses 5–7. Here Paul shares his own travel plans. When he began ministry in Corinth, he had lived there for a year and a half. Now he was in Ephesus, busy in ministry, but in his heart he wanted to return to Corinth to help this struggling new church. He mentioned earlier in this letter that he wanted to visit them (4:19), and now he promises to do so again. It seems like some of them wanted Paul to come right away, probably because of all the controversies going on. So Paul explains in these verses why he can’t. In verse 5 he says he first has to go through Macedonia. That’s where Paul had established churches on his first missionary journey. It had been several years since, and Paul had never visited these churches, so he says he has to go there first. In verse 6 he says he may not reach Corinth until winter, but would like to stay there for a while. He says it was so that they could help him on his journey, but really it would be so that *he* could help *them*. In verse 7 he emphasizes how he wants not to have to visit them only briefly, but to really spend quality time with them. This is another practical illustration of love. If we love others, we humbly explain what we’re doing. And, if we love them, we really value spending time together.

Look at verses 8,9. Here Paul explains that he won’t begin any of this travel until after the Jewish Feast of Pentecost, which was fifty days after Passover, in other words, sometime in the month of June. He also gives the main reason why he cannot leave Ephesus and go to Corinth right now. Read verse 9. “A great door for effective work” most likely refers to Paul’s daily Bible classes in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, where all kinds of Jews and Greeks in the province of Asia Minor would come and hear God’s word (Ac19:9b,10). God’s word was spreading to many other places and new churches were starting. It was “effective” partly because Paul wasn’t being hindered by persecution, partly because people were so genuinely interested in learning from Paul, and partly because while teaching crowds Paul could also raise disciples. He also writes that he has to stay in Ephesus to protect God’s work from those who opposed the gospel. In brief, Paul is staying in Ephesus because God wants him to, because he genuinely loves Jesus and because he genuinely loves the people God is sending him.

Look at verses 10,11. Paul writes how he’s sending Timothy to Corinth right now. He already mentioned Timothy’s coming in 4:17: “For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.” Actually, Timothy had lived in Corinth with Paul and Silas and had helped get the church started (Ac18:5), so the Corinthians already knew Timothy well. But Paul says here, “…see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you…” Why did Paul feel the need to write this? It might be because Timothy was still so young (cf. 1Ti4:12). Timothy probably wasn’t used to traveling without Paul and representing him alone. But Paul also was aware of how some people in Corinth strongly opposed him. He was worried they might treat Timothy badly also. In verse 11 Paul emphasizes that no one should treat Timothy with contempt, but send him on his way in peace so that he might return to Paul, along with some other brothers. Even though it seemed risky to send Timothy to Corinth, Paul did so to express his love for the Corinthian believers. Doing things in love sometimes requires taking risks.

Look at verse 12. Paul again begins with the words, “Now about…” Evidently in the Corinthians’ previous letter they had asked that if Paul couldn’t come right away to send Apollos. Apollos had newly met Jesus and had been sent to Corinth after Paul, Silas and Timothy had left, and he was a great help to the believers there (Ac18:26–28). After Apollos left Corinth, as we saw in chapters 1–4 of this letter, some Corinthians were comparing him with Paul and saw them as rivals. In this verse, according to their request, Paul had strongly urged Apollos to go back to Corinth to help the church. It’s amazing. Paul didn’t see Apollos as a rival to his ministry but as his fellow worker in God’s church. Paul also humbly did his best to comply with the Corinthians’ demand. But Apollos was not willing to go right now. He knew this church had an unhealthy view of him and Paul and decided to stay away until they could resolve it. Paul’s explaining this matter shows yet another example of doing everything in love.

Read verse 13. Here Paul turns from explaining things to giving a final admonishment. There are four strong words here. “Be on your guard” literally means, “Keep watch” or “be vigilant.” What should they be watching out for? Paul wanted them to watch out for “bad company,” those ignorant of God and living in sin (15:33,34), denying the resurrection (15:12), not following the example of Christ (11:1), and thus, unwittingly causing trouble in the church. Paul also tells them, “…stand firm in the faith…” He’d just told them the same thing in 15:58: “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you.” Paul was urging them to live with resurrection faith, to let nothing sway them from it, and to always be giving themselves fully to the work of the Lord. Next, Paul writes, “…be courageous…” In Greek it literally says, “Act like men.” As we know, sometimes men don’t act very well! But in Greek this word meant, “Be brave”—unafraid of any suffering, ready to fight and even die, if necessary, for the sake of the gospel. Finally, Paul writes, “…be strong.” He’s writing not just to men but also to women. So “be strong” is not about physical strength but spiritual strength. We may be weak in many ways, powerless to do anything, but faith in Jesus makes even the weakest person very strong (Ac3:16; 2Co12:10).

Read verse 14. While in verse 13 Paul was talking about their relationship to the gospel, in this verse he’s talking about their relationships with one another. If they really practiced this verse, they wouldn’t have all those divisions, lawsuits, immorality and disorder in their church. But what does it mean to us, practically? First of all, we need to acknowledge that we can’t do everything in love by ourselves. As weak and sinful human beings we just don’t have it in us. We need to be united with our Lord Jesus the true vine (Jn15:5). And we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit, who enables us to love (Gal5:22). But it’s not automatic. We have to cooperate with the Spirit. We have to make a choice.

Often we do things for others out of a sense of duty. Sometimes, we act as if we’re doing others a great favor. Sometimes, it’s to feel better about ourselves, or to teach others a lesson, or prove a point. But Paul is telling us here to filter all that we do through the lens of love. If we were to first ask ourselves, “Is this really a loving thing to say or do?” we would probably refrain from doing or saying many things! Verse 14 basically is telling us to edit ourselves. If this is not loving, don’t even think it. If this is not loving, don’t even say it. If this is not loving, don’t even do it. On the other hand, not saying or doing anything, just saying or doing nothing, can also show a lack of love. Some say indifference might be the worst kind of cruelty. Paul explained earlier that in a church people should have equal concern for each other: “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (12:25b,26). Sometimes we should suffer with others to express our love. Sometimes we should rejoice with others to express our love. As Paul wrote earlier, love is patient and kind, it doesn’t envy or boast, it isn’t proud, or rude, or selfish, or easily angered, or unforgiving; it always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (13:4–7). Love makes us big enough to embrace anyone at their worst and to love them to the end. As our Lord Jesus said, we should be known for our love for one another (Jn13:35).

To illustrate doing everything in love, Paul mentions a real life example. Look at verse 15a. “The household of Stephanas” probably means Stephanas himself, his wife, children, perhaps an extended family and any servants who lived and worked in their home. Paul said back in 1:16 that the household of Stephanas was the only household in Corinth he remembered baptizing. Here he says they were the first converts in Achaia, meaning Greece, and that they had “devoted themselves to the service of the Lord’s people.” It must mean his wife, kids and servants, too. Clearly love had permeated the entire household. They were unselfish people who put their faith in Jesus into practice, always serving others—not just with meals, material things, a place to stay or meet, or with companionship, but also with the word of God and prayer. Read verses 15b,16. Here, “the work” means the task of sharing the gospel and serving God’s people. Those who live as loving servants in the church are the real leaders we should willingly submit to. Look at verses 17,18. Fortunatus and Achaicus may have been servants in the household of Stephanas. In any case, the three of them probably came from Corinth to Ephesus with the Corinthians’ earlier letter to Paul, and their presence really refreshed Paul’s spirit. They showed deep gratitude for Paul’s ministry to the whole church. Paul said it’s not powerful or able people but “refreshing” people who should be recognized in the church.

Look at verses 19,20. In this section Paul closes the letter with final greetings. He wants to help the Corinthians be aware of all the churches God was growing elsewhere. He also reminds them of Aquila and Priscilla. When Paul first went to Corinth, he actually met this couple there and worked along with them as tentmakers (Ac18:1–3). When he left for Ephesus, Aquila and Priscilla joined and continued to help him (Ac18:18,19). Now Paul says that Aquila and Priscilla “greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.” In Romans 16 they are in Rome, and the church still meets at their house. It again shows an example of doing everything in love. This couple was such a beautiful example of unselfish love among all God’s people, ready to go anywhere, do anything, risk anything to serve Jesus and his people. In verse 22 Paul warns them and us to love Jesus or be in danger of coming under God’s curse. And in verse 24 he closes this difficult letter with the words, “My love to all of you…”—the only place in the Bible where he writes such words. Paul opened this letter with a greeting of grace and closed it with grace (1:3; 16:23). It’s a good reminder that the grace of Jesus is our source for Christian life and love.

Read verses 13,14 again. May God make us spiritually alert and strong in gospel faith. And may God help us personally hold onto his word, “Do everything in love.”