

THE CARE AND FEEDING OF FELLOW-WORKERS

by Ray C. Stedman

The Apostle Paul is dealing with the practicalities of life here in the 16th chapter of First Corinthians. Last week we discussed his words on how to give and on how to plan and schedule your life. Now, beginning with Verse 10, Paul tells us how to treat our fellow workers.

I was reading just this past week a message I preached many years ago here at Peninsula Bible Church concerning the form of church government we have. I noted in it how I compared our form of government to Isaiah 11. There the prophet predicts that the time will come when the lion shall lie down with the lamb, the cow and the bear shall feed together, and a little child shall lead them. I never read that passage without thinking that is a wonderful description of our Board of Elders meeting together. We have one man who is like a lion -- bold, resolute, and very commanding, he speaks right up. Another is like a leopard -- quiet, but deadly. We have one who is like a bear -- affectionate, he gives you a big hug, but he can also be surly and growly at times. And here I am -- just an innocent, helpless lamb in the middle of those wild animals!

But when we meet together, a miracle occurs under the leadership of the invisible Head. The lion lies down with the lamb, the cow and the bear feed together, a little child shall lead them and we are brought into unanimity of viewpoint and decision. That has been characteristic of the actions of the elders here for thirty years now. God has led us to follow that principle of working only in unanimous agreement, as strong-minded men are brought into unanimity of decision.

Now, notice in this passage how the great apostle directs the Corinthians to treat different types of people in different ways:

First, he takes up the quiet, unassuming kind of person, represented here by Timothy.

When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. So let no one despise him. Speed him on his way in peace, that he may return to me; for I am expecting him with the brethren. {1 Cor 16:10-11 RSV}

Perhaps no other figure in the New Testament that accompanied Paul is quite as well known to us as Timothy. Two of the letters of the New Testament are written to him. He was just a young boy, probably in his late teens, when he joined the apostle when Paul came to Timothy's home city of Lystra. On that occasion Paul was stoned and left to die out on the rubbish heap of the city, but God graciously intervened and restored him, and he came back and resumed his ministry. This must have made a great impression on Timothy. He joined Paul, and traveled with him as his beloved and faithful son in the faith.

There are some commentators who speak of Timothy as though he were a very timid young man, very much afraid to get involved, because of the exhortations of the apostle to him to be a little more aggressive in his labors. But I do not think it was timidity so much as it was really a temperament that was quiet and unassuming and did not force its way to the front.

I spent this last week in Houston, sharing a ministry with Os Guinness, the remarkable young Englishman who has such a marvelous ability to analyze what is happening in the world of our day. Whenever I think of Timothy, I think of Os Guinness. Os and I were sitting together at one time, talking about how some had inquired about his age, and he said, "I guess I was cursed with a baby face. Everyone thinks I'm younger than I am." Because of that, he is not always listened to quite as effectively as he might otherwise be.

This was Timothy's problem. He was not a weak young man; he was quiet, not pushy. Therefore Paul writes to the Corinthians, "When Timothy comes, put him at ease among you." That is, reassure him, make him welcome. Those who are of this nature need that kind of receptivity. They need to be opened up to; they need

your arms of welcome extended to them.

Then Paul says, "Value his work, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am." The work of the Lord is always redemptive. It is a breaking down of illusions and a restoring to reality. It is a freeing work, bringing men and women out of bondage to evil habits and bad attitudes and wrongful practices and setting them free. It is a beautifying work, of bringing beauty out of ashes, giving the oil of joy for mourning. It is always the work of the Lord, and Timothy was an effective instrument in that. Therefore, Paul says, when you see somebody with that ability, receive him, welcome him, reach out to him, encourage him, young as he may be.

In fact, that constitutes Paul's third point. "Do not despise him," he says. Now, to despise someone of Timothy's character would probably be because of his youth. In fact, Paul wrote to Timothy himself, "let no man despise your youth," {cf, 1 Tim 4:12}. This reflects something of the culture and character of that day. Here in the 20th century we glorify youth, we hold it up as the greatest time of life. But in most other cultures in the world today, and certainly in that ancient world, it was old age that was revered and respected. People properly saw that older people have had an experience of life that youth has not had.

In most cultures, therefore, it is older people who are respected and listened to. When we go to Nigeria, this is going to be somewhat of a problem with us. We have a staff of young pastors, some very fine and splendid men, and we have already been warned that they may face a problem in this regard. In that culture, we are told, people will not listen to them, even though they may have much of importance to say, because they are young men.

This is what Paul is facing here with Timothy. But he urges people to not despise youth who have learned the Word of God, who have their ministry based upon it, but to listen to them.

I hope this will be true throughout these summer months when I am away. I hope you will give careful and rapt attention to the splendid expository efforts of these young men who will be preaching here.

Then fourth, Paul suggests that they support Timothy financially: "Speed him on his way." That is, do not force him to struggle when he leaves; give him something to go on, help him out. This is in line with the continual principle of Scripture, that if someone has ministered to you spiritually, then support and help him physically and materially. Timothy certainly well deserved that. These people were to share the benefits of his labor among them, therefore he ought to have the benefit of their help.

Then, finally, do not "hassle" him. I put it that way because Paul says, "Speed him on his way in peace." There is a temptation to challenge and argue with a young man, especially a young man who had been associated with the Apostle Paul himself. People who would not have dared confront or argue with Paul would grab hold of Timothy and take him to task for certain viewpoints. Paul is warning them against this natural tendency to be overbearing toward a young man, but to give heed to him, to listen to him, to help him and receive him and reassure him. Well, that is how we should treat that kind of temperament and personality.

In Verse 12, Paul moves to more mature leaders and how to handle them. Here our representative is Apollos:

**As for our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brethren,
but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity.
{1 Cor 16:12 RSV}**

That is a most remarkable verse, especially in view of the attitude many today have that the apostles were, in a sense, "generals" in the army of the Lord, sending out people, ordering them here or there, and commanding these younger Christians to go at their beck and call, and so forth. But you do not find that here. This verse indicates that Paul does not command Apollos at all; he has no authority over him. He urges him, rather. In several places in the New Testament we are reminded by the apostle that he was not "lord" over anybody else.

Lording it over the brethren is, in my judgment, one of the great curses of the church today. Some men assume, for instance, that the office of pastor gives them an authority over other people. I believe that a redefining from the Bible of the issue of authority is going to be one of the hottest issues the church will face in

the next decade. Having just come from Southern Baptist country, I was very much confronted with this last week, and was challenged on it. Yet it was interesting to see how the word of the Scripture, in turn, shook men who had long assumed that they had an authority that the Word really did not give them. This is a good verse in support of that.

Notice that Paul respects the personal freedom of Apollos to be directed of the Lord, even as he himself is. He does not tell Apollos what he has to do, but he says it was not his will to come, and Paul accepts that. Apollos, too, was operating under the direct control of God. This is not only true of leaders, such as Paul and Apollos, it is true of all Christians. Perhaps the clearest word on this was spoken by the Lord himself when he said, "One is your Master. All you are brothers," {cf, Matt 23:8}. The church must return to that restoration of the sense of being brothers with one another, not in position over one another, but working together. I find Christians everywhere under the authority of men who seem to be dictators -- much like Diotrephes, whom John mentions in one of his letters, who loved to have the pre-eminence among them {cf, 3 Jn 1:9}. I am becoming much more bold in my speaking along this line, because of the widespread nature of this problem. I have to tell congregations at times that:

- No pastor has the right to tell them what they can do with their spiritual gifts.
- No pastor has the right to tell you that you cannot have a meeting in your home and teach the Word of God to whoever will come and listen.

Now you should listen to him as a wise brother who understands the nature of truth, perhaps, and can give you great suggestions. But no pastor ever, anywhere, has the right to tell you that you yourself cannot follow the leading of the Lord as to the ministry that you have. Paul makes that clear in this passage.

Observe how he supports Apollos in this. Apollos will come, he says, "when he has opportunity." You remember that Paul and Apollos and Peter were three men around whom factions were gathering in this church. Perhaps Paul wanted Apollos to go because he thought it might improve that situation. But that may be the very reason Apollos did not want to go. As he might have seen it, and evaluated it, and understood it, his visiting Corinth might even have aggravated the tendency of the Corinthians to cluster around an individual. So he did not choose to go, and the apostle supports him. This is a very helpful glance into New Testament life.

Then, in Verses 13-14, we have a word of exhortation on how to treat anyone who comes into the Body:

Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love. {1 Cor 16:13-14 RSV}

These are two general rules that should govern any relationship with others:

- Be careful, and
- Be loving.

Now there is a need for carefulness. Recently we have been treated to a rather amazing demonstration of the power of someone to go around and insinuate himself into congregational life and capture the imagination and the belief of people and lead them far astray. I am referring to the case of the man, John Todd, who went to many congregations and told them amazing things about how he had been a member of a witches coven. He had been party, he said, to the inner circles of a group he called the "Illuminati," who, he said, are working out a plan to take over and control the world. He spoke in terms that sounded so realistic that people believed him. Many pastors got behind him and supported him. Nobody challenged him until a few people began to get suspicious and investigated. They found that most of what he was saying was fabrication.

Be careful, Paul says. There are many philosophies abound today that sound very good when you take them all by themselves. Certain approaches to mental health, transactional analysis, transcendental meditation, etc., sound very good, but there is a catch to them. When you get into them you find yourself hooked into something that will move you gradually farther and farther away from the truth of Jesus Christ.

Then, "be steadfast. Stand firm in your faith."

I questioned Os Guinness this week about Oxford University, where he is now studying. Oxford was for many years the home of C. S. Lewis, that unparalleled champion of Christian faith. Os told me that the atmosphere toward Christianity there is very anti-Christian. We had commented earlier about how England is practically drifting into paganism, and that the church is very weak in its testimony. I asked him, "Why is it that men like C. S. Lewis and John Stott, these great champions of faith, have not awakened a band of young men, hundreds of them, who are following their pattern and arousing a great testimony of faith in England today? Have these men failed?" "No," he said, "they have not. There were many young men who have followed them, and still are, but the problem is, when they are exposed to the withering contempt of modern secular scholarship in a university like Oxford, with its anti-Christian character, they wilt, they compromise, they give in to it. As a result, the university remains in darkness." What a day we live in, to stand firm in our faith. Do not be misled by any will-o'-the-wisp secular idea that seizes the popular mind for the moment.

With that Paul links courage: "Be strong." Now strength, in Scripture, is never seen to derive from building up your own abilities or your self-confidence. It is quite the opposite. It is to understand your utter weakness and to rely upon the greatness of God to work with you. In the Word of God, strength always comes out of weakness. The apostle's word to those in any time of stress and danger is, "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil," {Eph 6:10-11 RSV}. So be careful, but, also, be loving.

Nothing hurts the Christian cause more than the discourteous, impulsive rudeness that you see so frequently displayed. Some time ago I listened to a man teaching some great truth, but he did it with such a chip on his shoulder, such an arrogant attitude of contempt for those of whom he was speaking, that everybody went away turned off at what he was saying. Now what he was saying was right, but he could have helped his cause tremendously had he been courteous. Be loving, Paul says. Do not be arrogant, spiteful and obnoxious with those to whom you are speaking.

Then he comes to another group, those among us who serve, Verses 15-18:

Now, brethren, you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, [that is an ancient name for Greece] and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to be subject to such men and to every fellow worker and laborer. I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence; for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such men. {1 Cor 16:15-18 RSV}

These three men were the ones who brought to Paul, in Ephesus, the letter from Corinth that he is partially answering with this letter we are studying. They had given him a report of the conditions of the church there, and, as he says, they had encouraged him and refreshed his spirit. He is remembering the faith of Stephanas and, by implication, suggests that is what we are to do with those who have helped us. Stephanas, he says, was the first convert in Greece. That means he probably was a citizen of Athens, for it was there that Paul first began to preach in Greece. He may have been one who was converted by that remarkable message, preached in the Areopagus, that is recorded in the 17th chapter of Acts. At any rate, he was the very first convert, and Paul never forgot him.

Remember also, he suggests, the love of these men. Stephanas and his household devoted themselves to the service of the saints. Stephanas had a problem -- he was an addict. That is literally the word here. He addicted himself to the service of the saints. He did it so consistently and continuously that he was like an addict -- he had become hooked on hospitality. There are many of you who are that way. I rejoice in seeing it. Your homes are open to strangers and to anyone who is in need.

Now we are to remember such men and give heed to them, Paul suggests. Be subject to them, he says. That does not mean obey them. It means listen to them; they have something to say. Their ministry of hospitality makes them able people with ideas that you ought to listen to. And rejoice in them, as Paul himself did at the coming of these men, because they refreshed his spirit.

Do you know people like that? When you are with them they pick you up, they make your day, they refresh your spirit. Well, rejoice over that, praise God for it, thank him for it.

More than that, thank them! That is the last thing Paul tells us -- give recognition to such men. I think we do too little of this here at Peninsula Bible Church. Often times we take for granted wonderful ministry like this among us and we never say, "Thanks!" I do not mean we have to have banquets and give out watches after 25 years of service. Just say a warm "thank you" to people for the way they refresh your spirit by their ministry of hospitality to others.

That brings us to the closing greetings of the letter:

The churches of Asia send greetings, Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. All the brethren send greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss. {1 Cor 16:19-20 RSV}

First, the churches greet each other.

There are two kinds of churches suggested here.

Paul himself was teaching in a rented hall, the hall of Tyrannus, where he taught, some manuscripts say, five hours a day, six days a week. Can you imagine the church that must have crowded and jammed into that hall to hear this mighty apostle? It was an urban church in the heart of Ephesus, and it sent greetings together with all the spin-off churches that had come out of that remarkable ministry throughout the province.

There is also a house church that sent greetings -- the church that met in the home of Aquila and Priscilla. Paul met this remarkable couple, who appear in several of his letters, in Corinth. They had come from Rome -- after this letter they return there -- and in the letter to the Romans you find them there again with another church in their house.

Then individuals send greetings. Their way of doing this, Paul says, is to greet one another with a holy kiss. Unfortunately we have gotten away from that today. We just hug each other. That at least is getting close -- I am glad to see hugs coming back.

In Poland they still have kisses. When I was there I was a bit embarrassed by being kissed three times -- they always end up on the cheek they started with -- by old men like myself.

This was what was going on in the early church and should again today, in some form at least, as a warm expression of affection.

Paul closes with his own greeting,

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. If any one has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen. {1 Cor 16:21-24 RSV}

This greeting is Paul's way of authenticating his letters. From the letter to the Galatians, we know that he had the habit of taking the pen from the secretary and adding in his own handwriting a greeting to the people to whom he wrote. And since, as many feel, Paul was almost blind, he wrote with large letters, scrawled across the bottom of the manuscript, words like this: "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand."

If any of you are traveling in the Middle East and you run across some old, dusty manuscripts with some large letters at the bottom, call me collect from anywhere on earth! It would undoubtedly be the most valuable document in all of history.

Then he wrote this rather strange greeting at the close: "If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed." The word is "anathema" -- literally, "Let him be damned." That seems harsh to many, but there are

certain things we must understand about it: First, it was not written to non-Christians. There were many millions who did not love the Lord Jesus, but Paul is not condemning them all to hell. He is writing to those who profess to be Christians. He is writing to those in a church where Jesus was preached and taught, and where every day many of them had immediate intercourse and friendship and fellowship with the Lord of glory. So what he is saying here is a kind of test of reality. He does not even use the word "agape" when he talks about love; he uses the lower word "phileo," affection, friendship. If someone has no affection for the Lord Jesus, then what does he have affection for? If he does not love truth and love and mercy and grace and life itself reflected in Jesus, then he must surely love the opposite. That is what Paul is warning against, that one who has not been so touched by the reality of the presence of Christ in his life so as to begin to learn how to love is only kidding himself about his Christian testimony. He is on his way to being damned.

Thus he closes the letter with this remarkable tribute again to the centrality of Christ in Christian faith. Christianity is not just a series of philosophies or doctrines to be taught. It is a Person to know. If anyone, knowing him, has not developed an affection for him, something is seriously wrong in his life.

Then in a kind of a play on words he adds to that word "anathema" another word from another language, the Aramaic word, "maranatha." It is translated here, "Our Lord come." Actually, it is a word that can be translated either, "Our Lord has come," or "is coming all the time," or "shall come." That is the way with Hebrew/Aramaic words; it is difficult to tell the tense that was intended. I think rather, therefore, this word ought to be translated, "Our Lord is at hand, he is present." That is the thought behind it. Therefore, anyone who does not know him will find that he is not very far away; he is at hand. If you do not know him, you can settle it very quickly, because he is available to man.

As Paul himself preached on Mars Hill, God is not very far from every one of us if we will search after him and find him. And, in the Lord Jesus, that finding is always made possible. That is the thought -- our Lord is at hand. That is the clue and the key to the Christian life.

He ends with these words of salutation:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you. {1 Cor 16:23 RSV}

That is the greatest need of Christians.

And then Paul's own personal gift,

My love be with you all in Christ Jesus, Amen. {1 Cor 16:24 RSV}

So the great letter ends.

Did you notice that it followed the pattern of the gospel?

Paul began with the cross: "I am determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified" {1 Cor 2:2 KJV}, because that will undercut all the false and phony wisdom of man. Then it moved to the burial of Jesus, the putting away of the flesh, the carnalities, the empty things that destroy Christian life. That is the content of the body of this letter.

Then it closes with a great note of the resurrection -- with our eyes set upon the hope that is to come, and the glory of the transformation of the body at the return of Jesus. And in the light of all that truth, the cross, the refusal of all that is contrary to Jesus, and the hope of the resurrection, Paul closes with that great word,

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. {1 Cor 15:58 RSV}

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for your Word. How it has blessed our hearts, enlightened our minds,

instructed us awakened our emotions, moved our wills, and changed our whole lives. Such is the power and character of your Word. Help us to continue in it in the midst of the pressures of these days, and to stand fast in our faith. We ask it in the name of our Lord Jesus, and by his daily grace, Amen.

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