

A Life Centered on Messiah
1 Corinthians 16:13-24

Introduction

Alright, everyone, it's a bit strange to preach our last and final message in 1 Corinthians at our first in-person high school group, but maybe this was providential after all.

We started our series in 1 Corinthians in the fall of 2018, and almost 3 years later, we are finally at the end. If you guys have your Bibles, turn with me for the last time to 1 Corinthians 16:13-24.

Scripture Reading

¹³Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. ¹⁴Let all that you do be done in love.

¹⁵Now 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— ¹⁶be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer. ¹⁷I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, ¹⁸for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people.

¹⁹The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. ²⁰All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

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

Opening Illustration

Every so often, I have the responsibility of leading the congregation in our time of corporate worship on Sundays. I invite people to worship, I pray for the offering, I give a benediction, and then finally, there's that little bit of time at the very end of the service, what's called family time, where I give the announcements.

And it's funny, because I see exactly what people do when I give the announcements. Some people go on their phones. Some people look around. Some people are getting up to use the bathroom. Some people are already leaving service and heading to their cars. For some reason, most people pay attention to every other part of the service but when we get to the end with the announcements, we zone out, we tune out, and we're already thinking about lunch. I mean, honestly, I don't really blame you.

Create the Need

But it's tempting to treat our final passage in 1 Corinthians in a similar way to how we treat the closing announcements at the end of a Sunday service. Because if you look at

your Bibles for just a moment, you'll notice that the heading title says 'final instructions' and 'greetings'.

And it's tempting to see these last words as mere historical announcements, greetings, and personal requests, dismissing them as unhelpful and irrelevant for us today. But they're not.

In fact, as high school students, you know that if you don't have a conclusion in your paper or essay, it will bring your grade down. Why? Because, as many of you know, even though a conclusion alone can't bring up the grade of an otherwise terrible paper, a conclusion is what completes and resolves it.

But more than concluding and summarizing all that he has already said, these are the apostle Paul's final words written to a problematic church community, but nonetheless a beloved church community.

The apostle Paul's final words not only ties up all the loose ends of his letter, but his final words give us a window into his very own heart. As the apostle Paul wraps up his letter to the Corinthians, what did he want them to leave with after hearing the letter in its entirety? What were the most pressing things on his heart, what did he care about most, what last thoughts still lingered in his mind?

What does the apostle Paul want us to walk away with as we close off our 2+ year series in 1 Corinthians? What final impressions does the apostle Paul want us to leave with?

What the apostle Paul wants us to walk away with after a 2-and-a-half-year study in 1 Corinthians is symbolized in these historical figures, Paul's friends, and greetings. What these final instructions, these individuals, and greetings reveal is a life that is centered on Jesus the Messiah.

And what the apostle Paul shows us in the last 12 verses of our passage is that as vital as it is to think and to talk about what a life centered on Messiah looks like, the apostle Paul through these last 12 verses wants to show us what it actually looks like.

These last 12 verses are the resulting fruit of what a life centered on the cross and resurrection actually looks like, what a life centered on Jesus looks like. This is the reason why we shouldn't dismiss the final greetings of this letter. They give us a vital picture of how the lived-out content of the letter looks like with two feet. What does it look like? Through these individuals that the apostle Paul name drops, it looks like a life centered on others.

Key idea

What the apostle Paul is going to show us in these final verses is that a life centered on Messiah is a life centered on others. That's it. What the final instructions, the

individuals that we meet, and the final goodbye symbolize and show us is that a life centered on others is the only fitting conclusion of a life that is truly centered on Jesus the Messiah.

And to demonstrate what a life centered on others practically looks like on the ground level, the apostle Paul shows us **3 snapshots of an others-centered life.**

1. The example of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (vv. 13-18)

Take a look at verse 13.

¹³Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.

Now, at first glance and at first reading of these two verses, they read like generic exhortations that Paul could have said to any church he was writing to. But upon closer inspection, these five final exhortations have actually been specifically tailored and written to address the main problem that the Corinthian church has been exacerbating. This is no longer the apostle Paul, but pastor Paul.

What do all five of these exhortations have in common with one another? Being watchful, standing firm, acting like men and being strong all have to do with maturity. How? It's found in that verb, 'acting like men'. What would it mean for not only the men in the church, but also the women and children in the church, to "act like men?"

Is this yet another possible instance of the apostle Paul being sexist? The contrast that the apostle Paul seeks to pose isn't the contrast between acting like men versus acting like women. It's the contrast between acting like adults versus acting like a bunch of kids.

It echoes what Paul had said earlier in chapter 13 when he says in verse 11, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways."

The apostle Paul isn't prioritizing masculinity, but rather maturity. This has always been the issue for the Corinthian church. Their maturity had not caught up with their giftedness.

Maturity, as we should know by now, isn't merely how long you've been a Christian or how long you've been going to church. Or who your parents are. Or who's disciplined you. The apostle Paul fathered the Corinthian church. That's got to show for something, right? Evidently not.

And it is here that the apostle Paul is finally calling you to wake up to be who you really are, or at least, what you profess to be. As the apostle Paul concludes his letter to this

gifted, but problematic community, he calls them to grow up and to be mature. How? Take a look at verse 14.

¹⁴Let all that you do be done in love.

This single verse is the TL;DR of 1 Corinthians. It distills the entire message of 1 Corinthians in just one single sentence. But this shouldn't be new for us. Over and over again, maturity and wisdom and spirituality are again measured and qualified not by how much you know, but by how you love.

Maturity is how we defer, consider, help and meet the needs of others. Of considering the needs of others as more important than our own. Maturity is not cognitive, but relational. It is evaluated, assessed, and affirmed *in* the context of human relationships and community.

So to show us what this maturity actually looks like in practice, the apostle Paul gives us flesh and bone examples. Take a look at verse 15.

¹⁵Now 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—

What does 'doing all things in love' practically look like? It looks like the household of Stephanas. How? Our English translations say that they "devoted themselves to the service of the saints" but it's actually far more forceful when literally translated.

In the Greek, it's literally translated, "they assigned themselves for the service of the saints." What the apostle Paul is pointing out in the example of Stephanas' household wasn't merely *that* they served, but precisely *how* they served. It was completely self-initiated. They freely and willingly chose to do so. It was completely uncoerced.

It's one thing to be asked to help wash the dishes, or to be asked to help with a sibling's homework, but it's quite another to wash the dishes when no one asks you to or to help your sibling when no one asks you to.

That is what mature love does. The way that the apostle Paul describes love is a kind of love that has the maturity to perceive the needs of those around them and to do something about those needs despite never being asked to do it by others.

No one asked the household of Stephanas to serve the church. Paul didn't ask them to. They saw the various needs among the community of saints and they decided they were going to do something about it.

These were the kinds of people who didn't ask, they just did. They were self-initiators. What the apostle Paul is trying to show us is that it's not always the size or the amount

of our service that communicates love, but simply noticing what needs to be done and stepping in to do it.

It's as simple and mundane as seeing a mess that was made in the hallway and cleaning it up despite no one asking you to do it. It's taking out a filled-to-the-brim trashcan without anyone asking you to do it. It's the simple thoughtfulness of cleaning up the mess made by someone even though that person probably won't even notice that it was cleaned up. I can go on and on.

What communicates love isn't merely the fact that you do it, but that you had the thoughtfulness to do it without anyone asking you to.

I was talking with my friend about how he was able to score his first vaccination appointment and then about a week later, I happened to be talking with his wife about it. And she was saying how he told her he was able to get a vaccine appointment but either somehow forgot to or just didn't think to sign her up for one. So the husband was going to be vaccinated, but the wife would not. I thought the story was both funny and also sad. The husband just forgot about his wife.

Now, I'm sure their marriage is doing just fine, but a lack of care or consideration for the other person is what kills relationships. It really hinders the growth of a relationship when one individual lacks the care and thoughtfulness to consider the other person.

The takeaway application isn't to help your friends get vaccination appointments. The takeaway application from the example of Stephanas and his family is "do we have the thoughtfulness to think of others without being prompted by others to do so?"

Do we have the thoughtfulness to stop being so self-absorbed and to reach outside of ourselves and ask how others are doing? Do we have the thoughtfulness to stop blabbering on about whatever we're talking about and to actually let other people talk?

Now, I know that this application will be a challenge for many of you high schoolers. Pastoring youth ministry for the past 8 to 9 years has made me realize that if even getting you guys to answer small group questions is like pulling teeth, then how much more difficult is it for you guys to do stuff without being asked to.

I know all of your high school excuses. "Sorry, I can't cause I have this, like, thing I need to do." "Sorry, APs are just around the corner." "Sorry, but not sorry." Look, I know you guys are "busy" high schoolers. I know you guys have stuff to do.

But the ability to demonstrate this sort of unprompted, self-initiated kind of love isn't just a good thing to do. It reveals whether you have truly grasped what Jesus has done for you.

How we love, how we give our self-initiated, unprompted time, attention, words, and actions to others reveals whether we have truly grasped the gravity of what Jesus has done for us. Jesus' love for us was completely self-initiated and unprompted. No one asked him to do it. The eternally begotten Son of God did not have to incarnate himself as Jesus and we could've borne our own sins and transgressions and God would still be completely just.

But he saw our needs, our sins, our weaknesses, our failures, and he chose to do something about it. He got his hands and his feet dirty. He became a man. He became like us. He suffered like us. And he died for us. This is why we do the same for others. Even when it goes unrecognized by others. Why?

Because God sees our self-initiated kindness, our unprompted forgiveness, our uncoerced concern, our freely chosen acts of service, mercy, and love. To encourage us, this is what the author of Hebrews writes, "For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do." The resurrection of Jesus was God's reaffirmation and recognition of Jesus' self-initiated love.

High school student, when your love goes unrecognized and unappreciated by others, high school staff, when high school students are ungrateful for the service of your time and leadership, God dignifies our unacknowledged and unappreciated love by remembering it, by affirming it, by recognizing it. God is not unjust to overlook our work and our love for his people. God values our work and our love even when it is undervalued by others. We work and love for an audience of one.

In fact, it is precisely because God does not overlook our work and our love that the apostle Paul tells us to treat such people with respect, recognition, and submission.

Take a look at v. 16.

¹⁶ be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer.

The apostle Paul wants us to submit to such people. This is surprising. Stephanas was not a pastor. He was not a formal leader of the church. He was a simple, ordinary Christian who were just a member of the Corinthian church. He did not have any notable skills or personality. He wasn't really popular. There is no mention with regard to his looks or any other external quality. What made him worthy of respect, honor, and submission was how others-centered they were.

The Corinthians were prone to rewarding and giving honor to those who were gifted, who had great charisma, who had great speaking ability, who knew how to make people laugh, who had good looks, who came from a good family, who knew the right people and connections.

But by telling the Corinthian church to recognize people like Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, the apostle Paul was redirecting their gaze to something that isn't obviously seen by the naked eye. What Christians shouldn't be rewarding isn't exterior and outward appearances. Because that's precisely what the world does.

The world rewards good looking people, funny people, charming people, gifted people, but it does not reward kindness, mercy, character, nor wisdom. This is the value system of the world.

By raising up individuals like Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus before our eyes as exemplary and mature examples, the apostle Paul is challenging our implicit value-system. He is calling us to recognize people according to God's value system, not the world's.

What Christians should be rewarding, recognizing, and praising, instead, are those who are simply considerate and thoughtful enough to consider the basic needs of others and doing something about it. So why don't we start small?

Lending your time, sending a text, praying a one-minute prayer for this person. We don't have to have grand, lofty utopian visions of this high school group mutually serving one another. I've given up on that vision a long time ago with each graduating senior class.

But to make it a bit more tangible, the person who immediately came to mind as I was writing this message was, can you guess? Obviously, me. I'm just kidding. The person who actually came to mind was Zach Chen. If Zach was here right now, his face would turn red and just leave. Sure, Zach would much rather stay out of the spotlight. He's not what most would come to conventionally expect as a leader.

But one of the many things that I appreciate about Zach, what precisely sets him apart as a leader is that he would do things without me having to ask him to do it. He just volunteers his time and energy. Whether it's setting up chairs, or taking out the trash, or folding my laundry.

In fact, it isn't just Zach, but also your leaders. Most of your leaders weren't asked to serve in the youth ministry. They saw that there was a growing youth ministry, and they chose to do it voluntarily, freely, willingly.

Many of your leaders willingly chose to give up their Friday nights, the end of their work week, not to relax and binge on their favorite Korean drama, or even hangout with their friends, although I must say that most of their friends actually serve on Friday nights. At the end of their work weeks, your leaders chose to serve you when they could've been doing something else. Do you guys think it's easy to hang out with a bunch of high schoolers who don't even want to be here?

You guys have living examples of 1 Corinthians 16 in action every week. But many of us take this for granted.

Because, of course, these are not the kinds of people we typically hold up and recognize, much less submit ourselves under. We like the powerful, dynamic, funny, gifted speaker who can preach, lead worship, and pretty much run the whole church by themselves.

And as great and gifted as those individuals may be, the apostle Paul wants us to redirect our recognition to those who can perceptively look at what the needs are and, without being asked to, just do it. The praising of people like Stephanas is the exact opposite of the Corinthian praising of their favorite preachers and pastors.

But there's another reason why we should submit and recognize such people. Take a look at verses 17-18.

¹⁷I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, ¹⁸for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people.

The second reason why we should recognize such people is because of the quality of their presence. Notice that these three individuals *refreshed, revived*, the apostle Paul's spirit.

In order to understand how much the apostle Paul appreciated this kind of refreshment, we have to take into account who the apostle Paul again was. The apostle Paul was running and managing an entire network of churches all through Asia Minor. He was a church planter. And he was also bi-vocational. The apostle Paul had two full time jobs—one working as a pastor and church planter, while also maintaining a tent-making business.

I think being a pastor of just a youth ministry is tiring enough, but the apostle Paul managed and pastored an entire network of churches all throughout Asia minor. In 2 Corinthians 11, the apostle Paul describes his suffering as an apostle, but he pretty much sums up his entire experience as an apostle when he says, “and, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.”

If you carried the mission of God on your shoulders every single day, how do you think you would feel? If you were beaten, shipwrecked, often finding yourself in danger, often hungry and thirsty, with frequent sleepless nights, what do you think your physical and mental state would be like? Most of us hardly function with two pulled all-nighters in a row.

Therefore, I think we can understand a bit more what the presence of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus was like for Paul then. To the wearied and burdened the

apostle Paul, it was as if their unprompted, freely initiated presence not only refreshed his spirit, but revived in him a new heart to press on.

When we have a rough day whether because of school or some friendship drama or weariness from the onslaught of what goes on in our world, the people who refresh us are those who make us laugh, those who tell us it's going to be okay, those who encourage us, those who weep with us, those who alleviate the burdens off our backs, those are simply with us, but you know what the key is?

It's those who do it without being asked to do it simply because they know. It's people who do it because they know how hard it is for us and they take it upon themselves to relieve us.

And the apostle Paul tells us to submit and to recognize such people. Who are these people in our lives? It's our friends, our church, our parents, our leaders, for some of us, it's our spouses. And by telling us to recognize such individuals, the apostle Paul is also calling us to imitate these individuals. More than submitting to these people, he calls us to be just like them.

The only proper way to honor and memorialize the care that we receive from others and the care that we receive from God is by doing the same for others.

By now, the application should be obvious. Are you an encouragement to others? When words come out of your mouth, when blue text bubbles are sent and delivered, when you are with others, are people encouraged and built up?

When you walk into a room and people see you, are people relieved by your presence or are people nervous by your presence? Are people fearful of your presence, constantly wondering what you think of them or how they fail to measure up, or are people thankful of your presence, knowing that they don't have to pretend to be anything around you? Is your presence suffocating for others, or is your presence a fresh of breath air for others?

When you open your mouth, are people worried by what you might say or are people looking forward to what you might say? In other words, are you a refreshment to others or are you a nuisance to others?

I was reading a book by the former archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and he made the helpful distinction between people who acted godly and did godly things but weren't actually godly people. Do you know what the distinction is?

He writes that people who act godly, but aren't godly, are those who are very strict, devout and intense, but the effect that they have on those around them is that, whether intentional or not, others feel worse, guilty, frustrated, insecure, and inadequate about themselves.

This is precisely how the Pharisees operated. The Pharisees may have looked good and performed well on the outside, but they were dead on the inside. Their supposed holiness or knowledge didn't help people grow but constantly made people feel bad about themselves, wondering if they would ever measure up. People felt crushed by their scrupulous demands for moral perfection.

In contrast, actual godly people are those who somehow enlarge your world, they make you feel like there is possibility for change, they open you up and affirm your humanity even when there is sin.

Actual godly people don't feel like their godliness is some sort of competition as if they have something others don't have. Truly godly people are people who don't make you feel bad for not being godly or for not being where you ought to be.

But it isn't that godly people make us feel complacent with ourselves, as if there is no need for change within our compromised and sinful selves. No, far from it, actual godly people make us feel that there is hope for change for our confused and compromised humanity.

They bring into our life the sense that our sinful selves have opportunity for new growth, that there is the actual hopeful possibility that God can change my life. Truly godly people actually make us desire godliness for itself.

Because when we experience the godly care and hope from actual godly people, it's as if we have experienced the tenderness and care of God. This is precisely how God in Jesus Christ treats us in the midst of our sin and suffering.

We see this most clearly in Jesus' response to sinners. Jesus called people to repentance, absolutely. Jesus talked more about hell than he did about heaven, but you never got the sense that he made people feel bad for how much they needed to grow or change. Rather, he gave them hope for change in himself. He was the answer.

It's the reason why prostitutes, tax-collectors, sinners, people who were so sick of their own lives, so sick of their fallen humanity, so sick of their sinful ways, so sick of themselves flocked to Jesus. Jesus did not shun them for their unrighteous and unredeemed humanity; but rather, he invited them to experience the hope for a righteous and redeemed humanity in himself.

Jesus would do what no human could do, Jesus would be what no human could be, and yet, he did not alienate others. Rather, others ran to him to find life, not condemnation. This is the kind of refreshment that we receive from Jesus and this is the kind of refreshment that the apostle Paul desires that we imitate and reflect. How we refresh others demonstrates whether we have been truly refreshed by Jesus himself.

This is what we see in the mature example of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus. Give recognition to such people in your life. Better yet, imitate their life.

2. The communion of saints in Asia (vv. 19-20)

Take a look at verse 19.

¹⁹The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.

I know this verse probably means nothing to us. The churches of Asia and the church that meets at Aquila and Prisca's house all say hi. I mean, who cares? They've all been dead for almost 2,000 years.

But before we write off these last few verses, maybe it might help if we made just a few more connections. It's important to point out where Asia is and where Corinth is. The Asia that the apostle Paul is talking about is what is now known as modern day Turkey. It's where the ancient city of Ephesus is located and was most likely the place that the apostle Paul wrote 1 Corinthians.

Okay, cool geography lesson. What's the point? The point is that Ephesus is hundreds of miles away from Corinth separated by the Mediterranean Sea. The churches in Ephesus was located in Asia minor while the church in Corinth was located in Greece. What do these churches have to do with one another especially when they're separated by both land and sea? And the answer is everything.

The point is that no matter where they were geographically located, no matter how different the culture was, no matter what ethnicity they were, no matter what language they spoke, no matter what province or region they were from, no matter what social class they were in, no matter what church they belonged to, no matter what pastor they had, they were still united as one family in the name of Jesus.

The mere greetings of the churches of Asia minor to the church in Corinth is a necessary word that we need today. The greetings tell us that there is no such thing as lone-ranger Christianity. The early church was a network of churches.

The belief and practice of a life centered on Messiah is *only* believed and practiced with others. Christianity, believed and practiced, in isolation is not Christianity at all. Online church, worshiping Jesus by yourself or just with your family isn't actually the norm, but really the rare exception.

We are not meant to be isolated Christians from one another. The fact that a church separated by hundreds of miles of water from another church wanted to say hi demonstrates the reality that we need one another and must be held accountable by one another. The Corinthians believed that because they were so gifted and

supposedly mature, they needed to be held accountable to no one, which only heightened and revealed their immaturity.

But more importantly, the reason why we shouldn't brush off the greetings between different churches separated by land, sea, culture, language, and ethnicity is because if we do, then we ignore the vital picture of what greetings were meant to do.

By greeting the Corinthian church on behalf of the churches in Asia, the apostle Paul was demonstrating what unity could look like across all sorts of churches from different backgrounds, geographical locations, different congregational makeups, and even different political leanings.

Greetings weren't just mere polite things to do. Greetings revealed a relational theology. To greet someone was to acknowledge another person's humanity *even if* your experience of life was different from them. Greetings represented the bridge and the point of contact between two different worlds and differing beliefs. Greetings were a symbolic reminder of what unites us even in our differences.

In an increasingly fractured world, as we increasingly disagree with one another, as we increasingly disagree with one another here in the church, as we burn bridges with others over disagreement, in the midst of intense disagreement, it is far easier to remember what tears us apart than it is to remember what brings us together.

It is far easier to bring down someone's humanity with whom you disagree with. We find ourselves in disbelief at another person's beliefs; we label them and even see them in a certain way.

If you'll remember, the Corinthian church was divided over literally everything. They were divided over their favorite pastors, over personal preferences, over their rights and freedoms, over gifts and abilities, over how to worship. I'm sure if they had carpet back then, they probably would've argued over the color of the church carpet or the color of the church bulletins and programs. The irony of the Corinthian church is that they were more unified by their pettiness than they were by their Savior.

But what unites the church isn't uniformity in what we believe about the pandemic, or what we believe the government should or shouldn't be doing, or what we believe or don't believe about social justice or politics or race, as important as those things are.

When our stance on an issue becomes the shibboleth, the secret word, what gets us in the in-group or the out-group, what gets the approval or disapproval of others, if what we believe about x, y, z is the deciding factor of whether we are labelled certain names, then we have lost sight of what truly unites the church.

What unites the church, what unites Christians, what unites you and me, despite the million disagreements that we might have, despite the conflicts that our disagreements

cause, isn't mere compatibility or uniformity of social belief. What unites the church across space, time, and history is the Messiah Jesus.

What unites our church with the church down the street, no matter what they believe about politics, no matter how they dress on Sundays, no matter what color the building of their church is, is Jesus.

This is why in the Nicene creed, it says, "We believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic church." There is only one church because there is only one Lord. Though there have been many Christian communities spread out across different times, places, and cultures, they are all mysteriously bounded and united by one Spirit.

And the church is *holy* because it is set apart by God. The church is God's church, not our church. The church does not belong to one denomination or group of pastors or even to a community. The church does not exist to accomplish the peoples' will, nor the government's will, but God's will in the world.

It is *catholic*, meaning universal, because it embraces all Christians everywhere through all times and places. The boundaries of the church are as wide as the human race. The church is catholic because it preaches a catholic message. The gospel is not preached to one particular social class or ethnic group. It is addressed to every imaginable human being.

There is nobody in the world for whom the message of Jesus is irrelevant. The gospel is as broad and deep as human life itself. It is a catholic, universal message, because it speaks to the whole realm of the human condition. The deepest human needs are addressed in the gospel. It speaks to the whole person, body and soul, individual and corporate. And, finally, the church is *apostolic* because it maintains the unity and the purity of the apostle's teaching.

This is precisely what the apostle Paul says in another letter, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all." Jesus doesn't obliterate differences, but he creates unity in the midst of diversity. He teaches us how to work together, how to talk with one another, how to love one another, despite our differences.

This changes the way that we look at disagreement and differences with others, especially with other Christians. This is why the apostle Paul writes that they send the Corinthians hearty greetings *in* the Lord. It is okay to differ, it is okay to disagree, but we do so as one single family united in Jesus. Take a look at v. 20.

²⁰ All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Brothers, in verse 20, is better translated as siblings. The apostle Paul wants the Corinthian church to see the church as a family, despite the differences.

Being greeted with a holy kiss symbolized something deeply important within the family life of God's people. One commentator writes that the holy kiss began *only with the emergence of Christianity* as a relational practice that expressed the closeness of people who were coming from many different social classes.

It was a symbol that transcended gender, national, political, and ethnic divisions and brought all sorts of different people as one in Jesus Christ. It was a celebration of oneness and solidarity and mutuality in Jesus that transcended all boundaries of class, gender, or race. Far from something weird or erotic, it was a symbol of unity.

So is the application that we start kissing each other like the early church did? No and I better not see you weirdos kissing each other. But the underlying application is, "what are we doing to build unity with one another despite our differences?" The holy kiss was socially conditioned for the early church, so what socially conditioned practice is applicable for today?

Well, what shows respect, what demonstrates unity, what symbolizes solidarity? Maybe it's something as simple as saying hi. Maybe it's something as trivial as sending or, for some of you, responding back to a text. Maybe we don't write someone off based off of just one statement that they said or just based off of some gossip.

Maybe we don't lump people in arbitrary categories. Rather than just believing what other people say, or reaching false conclusions, why not just talk with the person himself or herself?

We listen. We ask questions. We ask why they think this. Maybe we offer counter-perspectives with gentleness and care while maintaining faithfulness to biblical convictions and a genuine desire to seek the truth. This is increasingly becoming rarer and rarer in our current outrage culture.

So if you struggle to value people that you disagree with or just don't like, maybe start by asking, "What does Jesus enjoy about this person?" What would Jesus affirm about this person? What traits, strengths, and qualities did he put in this person, Christian or not?

God doesn't prize compatibility or uniformity of belief or similar experiences for our closest and dearest relationships as highly as we do. Your involvement in the lives of your closest relationships was never meant to be built on mutual likes or dislikes or your favorite music or hobbies or whatever else you guys are into these days.

Those things can get you in the door of a friendship, but they are not meant to be the core substance of your friendship with others. Why? Because as a Christian, if you are

a Christian, your vertical relationship with Jesus is the single most important determining factor for all of your horizontal friendships. Your relationship with Jesus will be the most single most important thing about you and if your friends don't share that with you, then you and your friends disagree on the most fundamental thing.

This is not the same as saying, "don't develop or have any good non-Christian friends." If I lived closer to my non-Christian friends, I'd probably still be pretty good friends with my non-Christian friends in high school.

But what the apostle Paul is trying to do is he is trying to get us to think bigger. Think bigger than just yourselves. Think bigger than superficial compatibility. Think bigger than just Lighthouse Community Church. Think bigger than just your friend groups.

There is a whole communion of saints all around the world. It is amazing how much more we have in common with persecuted Christians in Iran that we don't even know than we do with the non-Christian friends that we grew up with or go to the same school with.

And if similarity, compatibility, and commonality are what supposedly determine close friendships, then what about with Jesus? We have almost nothing in common with Jesus. Jesus is probably the strangest guy we will ever have the pleasure of knowing and meeting.

Even though he is God, he took on a human nature and will. We don't have a divine will. He was homeless and couch surfed people's homes. We live in affluent and comfortable Torrance.

He was a Palestinian Jew from the 1st century. Most of us here are Asian American from the 21st century. And even if you're not Asian, you're probably still a Gentile.

Jesus walked on water. He healed people and cast out demons. Jesus is precisely the kind of person our parents warn us about.

And Jesus was also sinless. We obviously are not. We have very different social and educational upbringings. Jesus definitely did not have a TikTok account.

Other than being human, we really have nothing in common with Jesus. And if we measure our relationship with Jesus strictly according to our normal standards of close friendships, there's no way we'd ever be friends with Jesus. He's far too different from us.

But despite being different from us, Jesus chose to identify with us. By becoming a man, Jesus would bind himself to our humanity and share solidarity with us. He would enter into our sufferings. He would be tempted like us yet without sin. He would absorb the wrath of God and stand in our place.

Despite the world of difference between us and Jesus, Jesus closed the distance and called his enemies and those different from him “his friends.” If Jesus can happily bring us into his family, if he can genuinely appreciate and enjoy us, if Jesus can die for sinners like us then there can be things that we can find to appreciate and enjoy about the other people that Jesus has brought into his family. That is a life centered on Jesus the Messiah. It is a life that is centered on the communion of saints, a life united with others despite the sea of differences.

3. The love of Paul in Messiah Jesus (vv. 21-24)

Take a look at verses 21-24.

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.

Much can be said about these four verses alone, but luckily for you, we’re pretty much out of time, so I’ll close with this last observation.

It is remarkable that grace from Jesus and love reaffirmed by the apostle Paul are the last words that the apostle Paul concludes with. After all the Corinthians had done, after who they were, after all of their lovelessness, after all of their division, after all of their love of self, after all of their idolatry, how could there be any room for grace in view of who they are?

But as the apostle Paul concludes his letter with grace and love, he reminds us that sin and suffering never have the last word. In fact, the letter closes in the same way that it opened. It opened with grace from God and closes with the grace from God. In other words, sin does not have the first word and neither does it have the last. Grace does. Always. That is the reign of grace.

And even the way the apostle Paul opens and closes his letter gives us a window into how we treat others. That no matter what kind of hard conversation we have with others, we start with grace and always end with grace. Whatever sin or hardship there may be, sin and suffering does not have the first word, nor does it have the last. Grace sandwiches all the difficult things we might share with others and all the difficult things that others may share with us.

Despite all that God knows about us, despite all that we have done, despite all of our past failures, despite all of our lovelessness, despite all of our hatred and bitterness toward others, God loves us anyway. That’s grace.

The fact that the apostle Paul closes with grace in the same way that he opens with grace demonstrates that our identity as a Christian does not rest on how much we

have cleaned up our lives, or how much or how little we resisted temptation to sin, or how long we spent on our devotions, or how hard we were holding onto Jesus. Obviously, all of that matters. But our identity as a Christian fundamentally rests on God's gracious and tenacious initiative to hold onto us. That is the hope of the gospel. That's grace.

Grace is what turns Sauls into Pauls, Corinthians to Christians, sinners to saints, lovers of self to lovers of God. But sometimes, not all stories end with dramatic transformations. Grace is what we'll need even to the very end.

If you'll remember, this is only the apostle Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians. He has written to them once already. And the apostle Paul is going to write two more times to the Corinthians after this letter. The Corinthian church was probably the apostle Paul's most corresponded church.

And what we come to find in later writings is that the Corinthian church didn't change but only got worse even after the apostle Paul died. At the end of the first century, in a letter written to the Corinthians, the church father Clement reveals that they were still manifesting the same sort of immature and childish behavior.

So when you have been corrected numerous times by an apostle and church fathers and you still don't change, what do you do? What do you need?

I was listening to this story of a pastor who was counseling a married couple. But the counseling sessions weren't going well. There didn't really seem to be much progress or change on either part of the married couple. And on a particularly rough day in counseling, the pastor just didn't know what to do or say. And so he told them that he was just going to conclude the session by praying for the grace and mercy of God.

And when the couple heard this, they said, "That's it? The grace and mercy of God? Is that all that you can offer?" And the pastor replied, "The grace and mercy of God is all that I have."

In the face of the problems of the Corinthian church, at the end of the letter, this is all that the apostle Paul has to offer. The grace of God in Jesus Christ. When change in ourselves and change in others is slow or nonexistent, we need grace.

As we conclude our 2-and-a-half-year study in 1 Corinthians, have we changed? If we have, praise God, that's grace. And if we haven't, guess what, we find ourselves in company with the Corinthians, whose slow and sometimes non-existent change still did not disqualify them from the love of God. And that's grace. If we haven't changed, then there will still be grace for you and for me. And, by grace, may we live lives centered on Jesus the Messiah. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all.