

1 Corinthians
Chapter 16:5-24

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Last June we started studying the book of 1 Corinthians together. Today we come to our final week in this series. If you've been with us from the beginning, I hope you sense that God has taught you a lot about himself and his word as we have studied this book together. We've learned about the power of the gospel to change lives. We've learned about the importance of building our lives and building our church on the bedrock, the firm foundation of Jesus Christ. We've learned that spiritual leaders need to be humble and that we need to be humble before our spiritual leaders. We've learned about prioritizing unity in our relationships, about the value of both marriage and singleness, about how to honor God with sexuality and gender. We've learned about the gifts God gives us through his Holy Spirit, how those gifts are used to build up the church we are connected with, how love has to drive our motivation in all we do, how the good news of Jesus dying for our sins and rising from the dead changes the world and changes our lives, how our responding to the gospel transforms us into generous people, and today, as we turn our attention to the final section in the final chapter, we are going to see that everything God has said to us so far gets fleshed out and applied in the context of relationships. Before we dive in, let's pray.

After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia. Perhaps I will stay with you for a while, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.

When Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am. No one, then, should treat him with contempt. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with the brothers.

Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity.

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

You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the Lord's people. I urge you, brothers and sisters, to submit to such people and to everyone who joins in the work and labors at it. I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you. For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such men deserve recognition.

The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house. All the brothers and sisters here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be cursed! Come, Lord! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen. (1 Corinthians 16:5-24)

Often people read these words about travel details and little known characters from the Bible and their tendency is to gloss over and ignore a section like this. They'll just skip over the entire chapter. But God has something for us here! In this letter that would eventually be read for thousands of years and by billions of people, God saw fit to have Paul spend this entire section talking about travel plans and people

he was friends with. Why is that? To answer the question, I want to share a word that has caused discussion and debate in Christian circles for centuries: sacraments.

- A ritual, action, or event that mediates God's presence and grace to people.
- A physical experience that conveys a heavenly reality.

Where Christians have debated about this is regarding what exactly should be defined as a sacrament. The Catholic church recognizes seven sacraments: baptism, communion, confirmation (officially joining the church), penance (confession of sin / reconciliation), anointing of the sick, marriage, ordination (entering into official church leadership). Nearly all Protestant churches recognize baptism and communion as sacraments and then have varying stances on the others. But here's the heart of the discussion: where are the places we can go and the things we can do to encounter the presence and grace of God? If we want to deeply experience the love and power of God, what should we focus on? What I want to humbly submit is that people in all theological traditions, Catholic and Protestant, have not given sufficient attention to the sacrament of relationships. If we understand a sacrament to be something that we can do to grab hold of the presence of God, to encounter his grace and experience his love and goodness, relationships cannot be overlooked. Because as real as God's presence is in baptism, and as real as God's presence is in communion, God's presence also lives inside everyone who is a sincere follower of Jesus. We learned this lesson earlier in 1 Corinthians 6:19: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" If God is truly dwelling in the life of every Christian, that means that every rational interaction you have has the latent capacity to be sacramental, to be sacred, to be an encounter with God's presence.

In 1 Corinthians 16, Paul describes four different types of relationships. I want to talk about each of them for a few moments and see how we can create space for sacramental relationships in which we can not only experience and receive the presence of God in our own lives but also share and extend the presence of God in the lives of others.

The first type of relationship we are going to see is "someone who is always there for you." In 1 Corinthians 16:10-11, Paul talks about Timothy. Elsewhere in Scripture we learn that Paul calls Timothy "a true son in the faith." Paul met Timothy when Timothy was just a teenager. At that young age, Timothy left his parent's house and joined Paul in his missionary journeys. It appears Timothy spent nearly 15 years of his life with Paul, traveling the world telling people about Jesus. When a letter needed to be delivered, Paul sent it with Timothy. When a church needed high-character, consistent leadership, Paul sent Timothy. Timothy helped Paul write several letters of the Bible. This clearly started out as a mentorship relationship, but after Paul and Timothy spent so many years together, experiencing so much together, it transcended a mentorship relationship and became a friendship in which each of them knew, whatever one of them was going through in life, the other would be right there with him, no matter what. When Paul was in prison and nearing his final days, he sent word to Timothy and said, "Do your best to come to me quickly."

We need friends like that. "A friend loves at all times" (Proverbs 17:17). Notice the last three words: at all times. We all need friends like that: up or down, thick and thin, they are there. These are the sort of friendships in which the love runs so deep, the trust and companionship are so profound, it doesn't matter if it's been one day since you've talked to each other or an entire year, you always pick right up where you left off. I've been with a number of people on their deathbeds. Usually, it's only family there with them, and sometimes their one or two closest friends. Who are the one or two friends you would want to be there with you? Whoever those friends are in your life realize, they are more than simply friends who are always there for you—they are a gift from God into your life, an expression of his love and goodness and a reminder that God himself is always with you, no matter what's happening in your life.

The second kind of relationship we see in this passage is “someone who sharpens you.” We see this in 16:12 when Paul talks about Apollos. We know some of the background of Apollos from the Book of Acts. In Acts 18 we learn that he was a Jew from Alexandria, which was one of the educational and intellectual capitals of the world (many of you will recall the famed library of Alexandria), and Apollos was quite the intellectual himself. The Bible says this about Apollos:

- He was a learned man
- He had a thorough knowledge and powerful use of the Scriptures
- He spoke with fervor and taught about Jesus accurately
- In public debate, he vigorously defeated his opponents and proved that Jesus was the Messiah
- He was a great help to everyone who had believed
- He had the humility to allow others to teach him things about which he had not yet had the opportunity to learn

Apollos was a man who knew God’s word, had an incredible intellect, and could speak and debate with the best thinkers in the world. He wasn’t an apostle like Paul, but in many respects, he was a peer to Paul, the sort of person who Paul could connect with and be sharpened by. Proverbs 27:17 says: “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” Proverbs 13: 20 says, “Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise.” We all need a friend like that. Someone who will sharpen us and help us grow in wisdom. Someone who challenges us. Someone who has a great mind we can process things with. Someone who is always going to speak the truth to us, and because we respect their intellect and character, we are going to listen to them and trust them if they call us out. If you are always the smartest person in the room, that’s not a good thing! You need to start spending time in a different room. No matter where we are, we need to be around people who are going to challenge us, push us, and make us better.

My schedule as a pastor and a father of three young kids is rather full. But two or three times a year, for the last several years, I have blocked off almost an entire week to go spend time with other pastors who lead churches this size or larger. We fly in someone with a PhD who is a world class expert in their field. We soak in whatever content they have to give and then all the pastors share how we are trying to put this into practice in our own lives and our own churches. It’s a big ask for me to be away for five or six days at a time with the season my family is in. But every time I ask Keren, she says, “You’ve got to do it, it makes you so much better.” Everyone needs a group of friends who are pushing them, challenging them, sharpening them to get better at the things in life that matter the most. Whoever those friends are in your life, realize they are more than simply friends who challenge you—they are a gift from God into your life, an expression of his love and goodness and a reminder that God is always sharpening you, sanctifying you, and calling you to become more and more like Jesus.

The third kind of relationship we see in this chapter is, “someone who refreshes you.” We see this in verses 15-18 with three friends named Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus. We don’t know as much about these men as we do about the other people listed by Paul in this letter, but we do know that Stephanus was the first person in the city of Corinth to become a Christian and that Paul personally baptized him and his entire family. We also know that he, along with these others, was sent by the Corinthian church to encourage and support Paul during his time in the city of Ephesus. Paul says specifically in 16:18 that when he was with these men, “they refreshed my spirit.”

We see a really beautiful example of this in the book of 1 Samuel with two friends named David and Jonathan. You could read entire chapters and see so many neat things about their friendship, but I want to focus on a season that was, without any doubt, one of the most challenging and discouraging windows of time in David’s entire life. He found himself feeling all alone and dejected, he had dreams and plans for

his life that he thought God had spoken over him, and even though he didn't do anything wrong, none of them were coming together the way he thought. He was exhausted and on the verge of total burnout. Some of the psalms of desperation in the Bible were written by David during this season. When David was in that challenging place, 1 Samuel 23:16 tells us that Jonathan went to David and helped him find strength in God. That's what a refreshing friend is able to do. Their very presence helps you find strength in God. Spending a few hours with them one afternoon or a couple of days together on a short trip puts fresh wind into your sails, elevates your perspective, gives you renewed energy, and helps you find strength you haven't felt in a long time. Whoever those friends are in your life, realize they are more than simply friends who refresh you—they are a gift from God into your life, an expression of his love and goodness and a reminder that God wants to refresh your spirit and give you encouragement, strength, and joy.

The fourth kind of relationship we see in this chapter is “someone who welcomes you.” We see this in verse 19 with a married couple, Aquila and Priscilla. When Paul met this couple, they not only shared the same faith in Jesus, they also shared the same profession as tent-makers, and it appears they had Paul stay in their house with them. When Paul felt it was time to go to another city, they went with him. We know that they opened their home for a church to meet there, and we also know that they welcomed Apollos, the man we spoke about earlier who was really intellectual and powerful in Scripture, into their home, where they taught him the way of God more adequately, which basically means they taught him about the Holy Spirit.

This couple had a spirit of hospitality. Everywhere they went, no matter where they lived, their house was open to people. Their lives were open to people. Whenever people were around them, they felt like they were at home. Everyone needs people like that in their lives. Sometimes, if you live near your biological family, you'll get this with your family, and it's a beautiful thing. But if you don't live near your family, you can find this through friendship and you can find this in your church family. People who will have you over to their house for a meal, people who you can spend your holidays with, people who, if you fall asleep on their couch, they aren't going to take a picture of you and post it on social media. People you feel safe around, people who you can let your guard down with, people you feel entirely comfortable being yourself in front of, people who, whenever you are with them, wherever you are, make you feel like you are home. Proverbs 18:24 says, “There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” We all need friends who love us like family. When you have friends who love you like family, don't take that for granted. Whoever those friends are in your life, realize they are more than simply friends who refresh you—know that they are a gift from God into your life, an expression of his love and goodness and a reminder that God is creating a space for you to feel at peace and rest.

There is a reason this comes at the end of the letter. All the things that Paul has talked about in this letter—from the implications of the gospel to spiritual leadership, to loving one another, to purity and humility—they all get fleshed out in real life relationships. These aren't simply things you learn in a classroom; these aren't simply ideas you study in a book. These are spiritual realities that always, always get fleshed out in real life, through real relationships with real people. Your friendships aren't just a gift from God, they are a tangible expression of God's presence, love and goodness in your life. They are sacraments; they're sacred. If we have eyes with which to see and a heart with which to receive, as we love one another, honor one another, spend time with one another, deepen our relationships with one another, we won't only find good friendships, we'll find God. We'll meet with him, grow in our love and appreciation for him, and see in a brand new light all the ways he pursues us, cares for us, and draws us to himself.

I want to give three very practical things we can do. Here's the first: share appreciation with people who have been this for you. Ask God to show you the friends who have always been there for you, who have

sharpened you, who have refreshed you, who have welcomed you, and tell them how much they have meant to you, tell them that you have received God's goodness and love into your life through them. Two weeks ago, before I started working on this sermon, my phone dinged and I saw a message from one of my closest friends, someone who has filled a number of these roles in my life, and it said this: "I'm reading a book that recommends telling the people who are in your foxhole, your closest circle, why they are there. You are in my foxhole, and here's why: 1. You're the most authentic follower of Christ I know. You balance that with being someone I can be myself around, too. I love that about you. 2. You are always striving to grow and get better. 3. You're someone I can trust and get honest feedback from." When you hear words like that from someone in your life it moves you to tears. It humbles you. It makes you so grateful for the gift of friendship, and it makes you want to be an even better friend. (I'm going to have to apologize to this friend because I didn't tell him I was going to read his text in front of a thousand people.) Whoever those people are in your life, find a way, a text, a letter, a phone call, a meal, to tell them what they have meant to you.

Here's a second application: invest yourself in these kinds of relationships. Friendships like this don't just grow on trees. They take time, trust, vulnerability, and commitment. You have to show up again and again and again in order for them to develop. These sorts of relationships don't develop if you are focused on what you can get but rather when you are focused on what you can give. One of the saddest stories I witnessed was when someone who Keren and I knew passed away. We went over to their house to spend time with their family. As we walked in, we saw raised garden beds all around the house. The person who died had spent all summer working really, really hard to grow hundreds of pounds of fresh vegetables. He grew them, harvested them, jarred them, and planned to give all the jars away to his friends and neighbors. When we showed up, his daughter had just finished pouring the last jar of vegetables down the garbage disposal. She poured so many down they broke the garbage disposal. There was an entire pantry full of washed out, empty jars. His daughter looked at Keren and said: "He wanted to give these out so badly, but he was worried that if he gave them out, people wouldn't return the jars, so he just kept them all safe in his pantry." All that work, all that harvest, so much to share, all poured down the drain because he wasn't willing to give something without the certainty of getting what he wanted in return. Sometimes when you are building a friendship, the reality is that you may give something to someone, and they may take advantage of you and never give you your jar back. That does happen. But occasionally not having your jar returned is an infinitely better way to live than getting to the end of your life with all your jars stacked safely in your pantry and your loved one saying, "They had so much to give, I wish they didn't keep it all protected and stored up in their house." Invest into friendships. I've talked about Rooted and Lifegroups 500 times from stage, and I'll talk about them 500 more. Lifegroups aren't the only way you can make friendships like this, but they are a wonderful way we can grow these sorts of relationships with others in our church. I was in our Lifegroup Wednesday night, and two different people said that outside the gift of salvation and the gift of their spouse and children, Lifegroup was the greatest gift God had ever given them." Invest into those relationships.

Here's the last application, and this is the most important one of all: find the closest companionship in Jesus. You might be in a season of life where you have a lot of incredible relationships, or you might be in a season where you need more friends and deeper friends. No matter what season you are in, the most important relationship in your life is always your relationship with Jesus. He is a friend who never fails. He is a friend who loved you so much that he gave his life for you. God not only reigns in heaven, he wants to dwell in your heart. He not only has the power to form the galaxies, he has the tenderness to be an ever-present help in times of struggle. Jesus likes you. He enjoys you. He has pursued you. He wants your relationship with him to be the most important thing in the world to you. So yes, we should look at a passage like this and focus on our relationships, but all that focus on our relationships should really draw our attention to God and cause us to prioritize our relationship with him over everything else in our lives.

To review what we learned in 1 Corinthians:

- In chapter 1 we learned that it's not through wisdom, philosophy, science, education, or technology that salvation has come to the world, but through the foolishness of God being willing to suffer and die for us on the cross.
- In chapter 2 we learned that ministry is not supposed to be built on a dynamic communicator, a disproportionately gifted leader, self-help theories or the latest and greatest techniques, but true ministry is built on the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified. The gospel is not just the beginning of our walk with God, the gospel is the beginning, the middle, and the end.
- In chapter 3 we learned that we will all stand before God one day, and everything we've ever done with our lives will be tested. It's like we will pass through fire—everything that was selfishness and futile will burn up. But if we build our lives with love, truth, sincerity, and purity, those things will stand the test of time and we will receive an eternal reward.
- In chapter 4 we learned that leadership in God's economy, leadership in the church, should always be marked by Christ-like humility and servant-heartedness and that we should trust and follow leaders who care for us well.
- In chapter 5 we learned that in a world filled with rampant sexual immorality, God calls us to purity, integrity, and righteousness.
- In chapter 6 we learned that in Christian relationships with one another, inevitably there is going to be conflict and disagreement, but when there is, we don't dig our feet in, insist that we are right, take one another to court and sue one another. No! We love one another, defer to one another, and do whatever we can to maintain unity and prioritize love.
- In chapter 7 we learned that if we are married, we are called to love and serve our spouse for as long as we both shall live. If we are single, even though the world may not see that station in life as valuable, in the kingdom, those who are single actually have a higher position than those who are married and can leverage this season of their lives to honor God and advance his kingdom.
- In chapter 8 we learned that when you have a disagreement with someone, you can technically be right and yet still be entirely wrong if you are not driven by sacrificial love, which is what God is calling us to.
- In chapter 9 we learned that though we all have rights, we should be willing to lay them down to serve and bless others.
- In chapter 10 we learned that in every situation in life, from the food we eat to the beverages we drink, the cars we drive, the hobbies we enjoy, the shows we watch, our motivation should not be convenience or personal preference, but rather the glory of God!
- In chapter 11 we learned how a worship service at church is supposed to be ordered in such a way to avoid distraction and draw all the attention to Jesus.
- In chapter 12 we learned that every person has been given spiritual gifts by God and those gifts are supposed to be used to serve the local church, the body of believers we worship alongside.
- In chapter 13 we learned that after everything else in the world fades away, love will last forever; love never fails.
- In chapter 14 we learned that God works in supernatural ways, and we want to be the sort of church that when people walk into our doors they sense deep down, "God is active and moving in this place."
- In chapter 15 we learned that Christ died for our sins, he rose from the dead, and his resurrection was a sign and a promise of what God will one day do for each of us, and for the entire world.
- In chapter 16 we learned that God calls us to be generous people who give, and who have sacramental relationships in their lives.