Stand Firm in the Faith
1 Corinthians 16:13-14

Today we conclude our series through 1 Corinthians called Christians Gone Wild. It has been quite a journey. I hope you’ve enjoyed it and been challenged by it. We have looked at a number of controversial issues: tongues, prophecy, healing, headship and submission, adultery, homosexuality, incest, the cross, the empty tomb, lawsuits, and getting drunk at communion. We have driven over a number of theological land mines in the history of Christianity and today we wrap up this fascinating book.

I nearly ignored this last chapter as, comparatively, it’s a bit boring, no real juicy stuff. In this last chapter Paul doesn’t do any intense untying of theological knots that he has in previous chapters. Most of it is just some house keeping matters and personal comments on what his travel plans are. While that is an aspect of this chapter, he also speaks from his heart, as a pastor. He talks about some things that are on his mind and speaks of how he feels for his people.

He starts off this chapter “Now about money”. That in itself is a good reason not to speak from this chapter, and chances are you are thinking, I should have gone shopping instead of come to a sermon on giving. Fear not we will just brush over it. Personally I am quite reactionary against the churches reputation that all we want is your money and everyone is forced to give 10%. So I tend to avoid preaching on it, but I want us to notice Paul’s heart. It’s not give so God will bless you, it’s not give so you will feel good about yourself, or give because you have to if you want to go to heaven. It’s give because there are people in need. It’s Paul’s Pastor’s heart

1 Corinthians 16

16 Now regarding your question about the money being collected for God’s people in Jerusalem. You should follow the same procedure I gave to the churches in Galatia. 2 On the first day of each week, you should each put aside a portion of the money you have earned. Don’t wait until I get there and then try to collect it all at once. 3 When I come, I will write letters of recommendation for the messengers you choose to deliver your gift to Jerusalem. 4 And if it seems appropriate for me to go along, they can travel with me.

The background to the collection for the Christians in Jerusalem was because many were living in extreme poverty, so he wanted to alleviate that. But I am sure Paul also saw the collection as an opportunity to bring greater unity within the church across Jewish and Gentile boundaries. Remember the Jews and gentiles were poles apart and by gentiles giving to the Jews who were suffering would communicate a lot. I know that was one of the key things that Sukhen loved about being here in NZ, to meet the people who cared enough to give to those he works with in Bangladesh.
Then in verse 5 and following, which we won’t read, Paul talks about his travel plans and the possible visits by Timothy and Apollos. He encourages the support of Stephanas and his mates, whom Paul had baptized. He really talks them up to the Corinthians. Again we see Paul’s pastoral heart in that it is believed that these three were once slaves, as the name Fortunatus was a name adopted by a freed slave (meaning fortunate) and are now more like employees. There is no way of being sure of that but it’s the best guess. Paul wanted to make sure that the Corinthians treated them well, respected them for who they were, brothers in Christ and servants of the Lord.

Right at the end of the chapter there also is a personal note from Paul pointing out he was writing the final greeting in his own hand. It is thought that Paul suffered from poor eyesight (maybe his thorn in his flesh) and that he may have dictated his letters to someone else.

Smack in the middle of these final greetings, Paul inserts a short but profound statement of advice to his readers:

1 Cor 16:13-14
13 Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong. 14 And do everything in love.

The Message
13-14 Keep your eyes open, hold tight to your convictions, give it all you’ve got, be resolute, and love without stopping.

In these few brief words Paul gives a sermon in a nutshell, a fitting conclusion for everything he has written to them so far about ending divisions and dealing with personal sin.

13 Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong. 14 And do everything in love.

And these brief words are just as relevant and powerful for Christians today who desire to serve Jesus. Let us take a closer look at each instruction:

1. Be on guard
The literal translation is Watch! or Be watchful or even Pay close attention. In the context of all that Paul has told them to do, of all the “interesting” stuff that was going on in the Corinthian Church, we see God is giving the Corinthians a final word of caution to be “spiritually on guard”.

Remember that the church in Corinth had a host of problems related to spiritual immaturity and misunderstanding, as well as tolerance of sin. Throughout the letter, Paul has dealt with these issues specifically—
• arrogance of those who were in leadership positions (whom he labelled spiritually immature),
• factions, or cliques, within the church (which caused arguments and strife and not only weakened the church, but threatened to destroy it),
• chaos in worship services,
• Christians suing other Christians in civil court,
• tolerance of a member who was living openly in sexual sin,
• gluttony and drunkenness at communion meals,
• pride in spiritual giftedness and misuse of spiritual gifts, etc.

Now, he is reminding them to be on their guard spiritually. He did not want them to treat merely the symptoms, that’s just a whole lot more rules similar to what the Pharisees developed. He wanted to cure the cause—

He wanted -
• them to wake up, to pay attention to their spiritual lives and their knowledge and devotion to God . . .
• spiritual watchfulness, as opposed to the spiritual ignorance, apathy, and indifference . . .
• the firm foundation of God, as opposed to the Corinthians’ devotion to a culture of competing philosophies . . .
• devotion to the only God and His spiritual truth, as opposed to the spiritual pluralism that was socially acceptable.

Spiritual indifference and spiritual ignorance were the root problems in Corinth.

Unless this simple instruction was followed, “Be on Guard” everything Paul has told them would have no effect. It is not a need to merely know the facts and having the right behaviours. The Corinthians - and we are the same - need more than merely change of behaviour. We must be on our guard, with a focused awareness of His care & protection & His love for us as His children.

There is a bit of a corny story that is used as an illustration. I don’t know if it is true or simply an illustration, but it does illustrate the solution to the problems in Corinth. The story goes like this . . .

A father and his son were working on a double-sided puzzle. On one side was a map of the world. On the other side was a picture of a man. The young boy had put the puzzle together many times before. As his father struggled to find the right place for all the pieces to complete the picture of the world, his son told him to turn the pieces over, because he had found it was much easier to put the puzzle together by concentrating on the picture of the man. Finishing the puzzle quickly, the boy told his father, "See? When you get the man right, the world is right."

That was the lesson for the Corinthian Christians - watch, be on guard, keep your eyes open spiritually. When people’s hearts were right, then the church would be
strong. Likewise, we should follow Paul’s advice to be watchful. Take a look inside. Am I spiritually aware? How is my focus? In this time when there is stuff going on all around me, have I internalized the spiritual truths about God’s love, about how he wants us to live in this world? Do I remember and really believe His promises in the face of uncertainty? How am I at depending on God and not myself?

2. Stand firm in the faith
God is telling the Corinthians literally to stand strong, persevere, do not deviate in their faith and trust. The meaning is deeper than our usual understanding of believing and trusting. In the context of his letter, Paul is telling the Christians in Corinth to stand firm in the truth that has been revealed to them, stand firm in all that Christ is and all He represents to the church.

Like the Corinthians, we live in a culture in which truth is regarded as relative. Our society scoffs at the concept of objective, unyielding truth. The culture we live in is dedicated to spiritual and ethical pluralism. Pluralism meaning a belief that there is more than one right answer.

The same environment existed in the Corinthian culture, and the Corinthian Christians brought that attitude into the church itself.

- They wanted their spiritual truths to be acceptable in society; And that is not necessarily a bad thing.
- they believed other religious ideas around them offered some strengths; and that certainly can be true, I see the dedication of the JW’s to the call of being a witness as a strength. I may not agree with how they do it and why they do it, but it is a strength.
- they argued among themselves which Christian leader’s ideas were the best; good healthy debate within the church to help discover truth is great
- and developed different flavours within the church; that can be refreshing and be reflective of God’s creativity.

However all these good things if we do not remain on guard and stand firm in the faith can cause all sorts of trouble for the church. We see a similar situation in the church at Ephesus, in which Christians were carried about by every wind of doctrine (Ephesians 4:14). In truth, Paul in the first century was already dealing with cliques in the church. And because of the divisions that rose from lack of spiritual watchfulness and firm stand on the truth, the church was weak.

In the centuries since, we sadly observe this trend continued, and the truth, which was delivered once and for all time to us 20 centuries ago, has a less-effective impact than it could have. Hundreds of different Christian groups exist, and the world observes us striving not for the faith alone, but debating silly trivial points. Sometimes it seems the gospel message of salvation and relationship with God is secondary to the desire to win doctrinal debates.
If we are to be the witnesses God wants us to be, and if we are to have the relationship with God that He wants for us, then we must follow Paul’s encouragement to *stand firm in the faith.* ie Creation seminar

3. Be courageous

This phrase literally translates *Act like men.* Sorry ladies, such was the culture that this was written in, but if we can get over the gender issues of the day we see that God wants us, in the midst of our spiritual watchfulness and our commitment to stand firm in the truth of the faith, to act courageously as Christians.

The cultural suggestion here is of an experienced soldier of the first century, a picture of courage gained from being proven on the battlefield. The call to be courageous as Christians spoke volumes to the Corinthians, because Paul is telling them to forget the expectations of the culture around them to accept the cultural pluralism of the society. To *be people of courage* spiritually, to stand firm would be unpopular, perhaps even unacceptable, behaviour in first century Corinth, sounds familiar doesn’t it. It could mean loss of stature in society, perhaps loss of jobs and economic opportunities, and loss of friends among the non Christians.

Yet Paul wants them to encourage them to achieve the standard that God has set. He is telling them, they know the truth, and now they must live out the truth, courageously. This is consistent with his earlier instruction to them not to be children in their thinking, but to be mature (14:20). Spiritual maturity demands courageous application of the truth, total support of what we know is spiritually true and bold, *but wise,* opposition to what we know is false.

4. Be strong

This literally is translated *be strengthened.* It is in the passive voice, as opposed to the first three instructions of the passage. When Paul tells his readers to be on guard, to stand firm, and to be people of courage, he is telling them things they are to do. When he tells them to *be strong,* however, he is referring to a willingness to allow God to strengthen them - something God does to them and for them, not something they can do for themselves. The instruction is to submit to the strengthening power and work of the Holy Spirit.

Once again, we turn to Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, where he states it more completely: *Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might* (Eph 6:10). I said that this is not something we do ourselves, but something God does to us. But there is something we must do - we must submit ourselves to Him so He can make us strong in the faith and the truth. We submit, and He fulfils His promise to strengthen us.

And what is the strength He gives us? In the immediate Corinthian context, it is the strength to stand firm in spiritual knowledge and truth and to courageously apply spiritual truths in our lives. Come to think of it, it’s the same context for us in 21st
Century West - in the face of spiritual and ethical pluralism in the extreme, we must stand firm in spiritual knowledge and truth and apply them with courage. Our part is to be on guard, to recognize and know what is spiritually right and wrong, and to act with courage. God’s part is to strengthen us.

5. Do everything in love

13 Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong.

Just as well Paul included these next words, Do everything in love, otherwise it would be very easy for Christians to get stroppy and strut around telling everyone that they are wrong, we are right, and that they are all doomed to hell. – oops!

That may work in some cultures, didn’t seem to work in the Corinthian culture, and I don’t think it generally works in our kiwi culture, so Paul brings the Corinthian Christians full-circle, back to the basis or foundation for how Christians should live and act. We encounter this time after time as we read the bible. Do everything in love. This is another way to say we should be like Christ - reflect His love for us in our love for Him and in our love for each other. Christ likeness is the foundation for every decision we make, every action we take, every interaction we have with each other, as well as our interactions and relationships with unbelievers. This is why we as a church have two of our slogans to Live like Jesus and to Love without measure. It is the essence of being a Christian.

As we come to the end of our study of 1 Corinthians I hope you have seen how consistent God is in showing us how to live and apply the gospel message. For us in the 21st century church, the cultural context of the message may be somewhat different, but at the same time the context and the message are also remarkably consistent: our goal is to Live like Jesus, to Love without measure, to make sure we are Learning our faith and then not just sitting around feeling good about ourselves but Leading to make a difference!

Where do you need to grow?
Our Christian Growth

Live LIKE JESUS

LEAD TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Love without measure

LEARN OUR FAITH