

The Body in Action

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Preacher: Mark Chew

[0 : 00] Well, we come to the last chapter of 1 Corinthians tonight, and if you've got your Bibles, you could leave them open to that letter. Or else, there are outlines, and I've managed to print the Bible passage on the right-hand column as well.

Father, we thank you that you've given us your word, and that also you've given us the opportunity to be a partner in your work. And so as we look at this chapter tonight, give us that great encouragement and that great enthusiasm to give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord. Amen.

Well, I wonder whether you are the type of person that stays in the cinema after the movie ends to watch the closing credits. And I don't just mean looking at the big-name movie stars, but looking all the way to the end.

Like trying to find out who the best boy was, or the key grip, if you even know what those things mean. Or who the caterer might be that was on location.

Well, I have to say, not many people do that. And if you do, don't worry, you don't have to admit it tonight. I certainly don't. And I guess, looking at the last chapter of 1 Corinthians tonight, it feels a bit like that, doesn't it?

[1 : 18] There's a whole series of travel plans and greetings, which we don't think are any relevant to us today. We think that perhaps last week, chapter 15, was the end.

It was the climax of the movie, so to speak. We saw Jesus' resurrection and the hope that Jesus gives us of our own resurrection last week. And so it would be tempting to skip this chapter and move on to something else.

But because we believe that all of God's word is inspired and is useful for teaching us, we're going to look at this chapter tonight and see what God has to say to us.

And I guess when we look a bit deeper, we find that what is contained here is Paul putting his own words in the letter into action. So in chapter 12, he talks about the unity of the body, and here he's applying it.

In chapter 13, he moved on to say how important love was. And again, in this chapter, we look at how he applies that. And then finally, in chapter 15, he talked about the importance of the work of the gospel or the work of the Lord.

[2 : 25] And again, we see him talking about the work tonight. So we're not going to look at this passage verse by verse, because I don't think there's a sort of a logical argument that we need to follow. Instead, we're going to look at it under the three broad headings that I've got in the outline.

First, we're going to look at the travel plans of Paul. Now, at first, it may look a bit confusing, all this to-ing and fro-ing and where is Paul going. But I guess we could actually understand it largely as to how the paragraphs are aligned.

So first, we see that Paul's ultimate goal was for him to get the collection from Corinth to Jerusalem. That's verse 1 to 4. We know from elsewhere that there was an economic hardship in Judea, probably a few years back.

And Paul wanted to gather a collection to help out God's people there. And he does that across the whole region and not just in Corinth. Then Paul himself would like to take, if he could, that collection himself, which meant that he had to travel from Ephesus, which was where he was, to Corinth.

And so we see in the next few verses from 5 to 9 that he plans to take a trip there, but he planned to do it in a roundabout way. So he was meant to go up to Macedonia, which is up north, and then come back down before going into Achaia, which is that little peninsula at the bottom, just below that mainland.

[3 : 56] But Paul says he can't come straight away, so what he does is he sends Timothy. And that's what we see in verse 10 and 11. And he gives some instructions about how they should treat Timothy. Now, of course, this letter had to reach Corinth before Timothy got there.

So now what Paul does is he sends the brothers, in verse 11 and 12, to Corinth, ahead of Timothy and Paul, to give them these instructions. And by the by, he tells them that Apollos is not going to come with them.

But before all that had to happen, Paul himself had some visitors. And so that's verse 15 to 19. We see Stephanus and company, or Stephanus and Paul, who come from Corinth.

And quite possibly they would have taken the letter which the Corinthians wrote to Paul, which Paul then replies to in this first letter of the Corinthians. And then by way of conclusion, Paul ends the letter with some final greetings and instructions.

But secondly, what we see is that as we read through the travel pens, it comes through very clearly what Paul's gospel priorities are. You see, his plans and his instructions are shaped and determined by the passion that he has for God's work.

[5 : 14] And so what I've done is summarize these under two headings. He has a priority for God's word. So firstly, God's people.

Paul, you see, has a very comprehensive view of who God's people are. Those of you who have been with us since the start of this letter would remember that at the very start of chapter one and verse two, Paul says that he's called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and our brother Sosthenes.

And then he says to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus. And then he adds that called to be his holy people, that's the people in Corinth, but together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so even at the start of the letter, Paul has a very big view of who God's people are. It's not just people in Ephesus, not just the people in Corinth, but it's anyone and everyone who gather together everywhere to call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so that includes the people in Judea and in Jerusalem. And so even though they were miles apart, Paul felt as much concern and care for these people in Judea as he felt for the people in Corinth and in Ephesus.

[6 : 37] Now, you have to remember in those days that traveling and transporting money to this ancient world was actually quite a dangerous affair.

There's no such thing as EFT or PayPal. And there were no armor guards to sort of truck the money from one city to another. And so what Paul was undertaking was actually a big undertaking with lots of risks of potential danger and loss.

Now, the other thing we see with God's concern about God's people in Judea is that his view of God's people transcends both culture and language.

See, the church in Judea was largely made of Jews, while those in Greece and elsewhere in Asia Minor were Greek-speaking or Hellenic Jews and Gentiles.

But Paul's concern for God's people was colorblind. So it's great today that we could hear a testament in Chinese and see so many people from so many nations gathered here from Holy Trinity, at Holy Trinity.

[7 : 44] A few weeks back, we had two Bible college lecturers come from Papua New Guinea, and we could hear their work, God's work there. And of course, we have missionaries across the world.

So it's a great thing to acknowledge and to know that God's people are not just located here in Holy Trinity, but across the world doing God's work wherever they are.

And so there's one thing I want to encourage. We know we pray for our link missionaries and all that each week. But I also want to encourage that if you, those of you who come here regularly, have actually connections with other parts of the world, and you hear of prayer requests or concerns from friends or whatever in those parts of the world, well, let me know, and I would like to pray for them each week, even as we pray for our link missionaries.

Now, Paul's concern was not only for God's people in Jerusalem, but also for God's people in Corinth. And so we see that Paul is concerned.

He writes this letter to them out of fear for their faith, answering a lot of the questions. And even here in verse 13, Paul urges them again to be courageous, to be strong, to stand firm in the faith.

[8 : 59] And if you read through the rest of the letter, some of those words would have been pretty strong words. It would have come across perhaps maybe as quite harsh. So Paul doesn't just leave it there and, you know, write a letter and hope for the best.

His heart is with the people, and he wants to come and see them through. He wants to come and sit with them, you know, wrestle with them what he's taught them, talk it through with them, and make sure they understand what he's actually written to them.

And so he says in verse 7 that he hopes not to just come for a passing visit, but for an extended one. And you have to appreciate that, and you would appreciate it if you read the second letter, that actually his visit didn't quite go as planned, that there was a risk of conflict when he actually arrived because of what he was trying to teach them, because of the discipline he was trying to instill.

So it's not a pleasant situation, but Paul was not deterred because he had a concern for God's people in Corinth. And I could say more about his concern for God's people in Ephesus as well, but I'm going to skip that for tonight because of time.

But you'll see that later on towards the end of this chapter. Now the one thing, of course, that stops Paul from doing this, going to Corinth immediately, was his other passion, which was preaching God's word in Ephesus.

[10 : 15] So Paul says in verse 9 that there is a great door for effective work opened for him. And if you read Acts, you will know that what Paul was talking about was the work of the gospel, the work of preaching God's word in that city.

And he was determined to do this even though, and in spite of, all the opposition that he was facing there. Both of these often go hand-in-hand, opposition and the preaching of God's word.

But Paul was undeterred. He knew that that was what God wanted him to do, and therefore he was passionate about staying in Ephesus. And so we see here Paul's priorities in the work of the Lord was both God's people and then God's word.

Actually, it's about bringing God's word to God's people. They go hand-in-hand. They're not two separate things. God's people actually need God's word. And actually, it is by God's word that people from all nations become God's people.

And so if you understand these to be Paul's priorities and have these in mind, then you'll sort of understand when Paul now enlists the help of the Corinthians in the work of the gospel.

[11 : 33] Paul wants the Corinthians to help God's people wherever they are and to be in a partnership in the preaching of God's word. And so in this third section, we'll look at what three specific things that Paul urges the Corinthians to do.

They are firstly to share with God's people, secondly to support God's workers, and then thirdly to submit to Godly leaders. Many of you, I'm sure, would have responded to the flood appeals that came a year ago in Queensland and elsewhere.

And I guess many of us respond because we are moved by the plight of these people. We're connected to them by our common humanity. And so even though we don't know them, we are moved to give, to help them up, to rebuild their lives and rebuild their homes.

And it's the same with a lot of other natural disasters around the world. And a bit of that is happening here when Paul asks for them to collect the collection. But there is actually another more important reason for Paul asking them to help the church in Judea.

See, in verse 1, Paul says that these are the Lord's people. These are the Lord's people just like they were. These are people who are not just part of, as if we've looked at last week's chapter 15, they're not just part of the first Adam.

[13 : 00] They were not part of humanity, but they were also part of God's new creation. They were part of the second or the last Adam. And so even though they did not know them in person, Paul wanted them to share and to help them because they were actually going to share in eternity with them.

And I guess that's true for us as well, that when we hear of the stress with the church around the world, we need to remember that these are our own brothers and sisters in Christ, saved just like we are by the blood of Jesus, sharing in the same hope of glory as we do.

And so there is no reason why we shouldn't be helping them as much as we can, not just praying, but sharing with them according to their need.

Well, then the next thing we see is that Paul urges them to support God's workers. And we see this first in verse 6, where Paul says, I'm going to come to you and perhaps spend a winter with you and then go on my way.

But then he says, I would like you so that you can help me on my journey wherever I go. Later on, he says of Timothy, a similar thing. So in verse 10, he says, 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 as I am.

[14 : 26] No one then should treat him with contempt. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. Now, I'm sure that Paul wasn't just saying, you know, just give Timothy a pat on his back, you know, say, good on you, keep going, and then sending him away and not giving him material help.

Paul wanted them to supply whatever need he had so that Timothy could go and travel in peace and return back to Paul. So what is the basis on which Paul is asking for this?

Well, similarly, as with sharing with God's people, Paul was saying that the Corinthians were being asked to share in the work of the Lord. In verse 10, as I've already read, Timothy is carrying on the work of the Lord just as I am.

Both Timothy and Paul are doing God's work. And if you remember, again, last week in chapter 15 and verse 58, Paul says that he wanted the Corinthians to give themselves fully to the work of the Lord.

And so everyone is involved in the work of the Lord. And one way that the Corinthians could help out or could do the work of the Lord was to support Paul and Timothy in their work.

[15 : 39] And that's what happens too when we financially support gospel workers like missionaries or like Martin or Sandra. We're not just giving money to them. We're actually becoming partners in the work, in God's work with them.

So it's not just Martin and Sandra or whoever else that's doing the work, but all of us. God has called all of us to do this work. And we ourselves would want to be part of this work because, you know, we have been transformed by the gospel.

And so now, actually, we want other people to share in that same joy and benefit that we have experienced. So Paul urges all of us to give ourselves to the work of the Lord and to support particularly God's workers.

All of us are being called to the work of the Lord, but it is some who have been called, I guess in a sense, to forego their normal means of livelihood in order to dedicate themselves fully to this work, to become evangelists or preachers or pastors.

I would like to say a story of Jimmy. Jimmy, you know, is a member of our congregation and he's here with us from New Zealand Christ Church and we wouldn't hold that against him. But four years he's going to be here in full-time study.

[16 : 58] And the only reason he's able to do this is because he has a really generous church back in Christ Church that supports him for four years without, in a sense, any payback, without seeing any fruit to them, that is.

And it's a risk, isn't it? Because Jimmy could just come here, just watch the All Blacks play every weekend, you know, go out onto the city. He could, you know, he could not study, he could not do what he was being asked to do and the people would have given their money as it were, in vain.

But yet, they've seen in Jimmy that God has called him to do this work and so they've entrusted him with these resources so that he can come and do this.

They are as passionate about the work of the Lord as he is. And so, some of them physically or whatever are not able to do the work of preaching the gospel or teaching themselves.

But they say, no, we're going to support Jimmy because we believe in this work of the Lord. And so, it should be with us as well that all of us are in different circumstances but if we love the Lord and we're passionate about the gospel then we should be asking, how can we be engaged in this work of the Lord and how can we be supporting God's workers?

[18 : 19] Now, it's important that we understand this because otherwise, we have the wrong motivation for giving. So, some of us, I'm not sure, none of you I'm sure but outside here, some people might think that giving is a bit like taxes, you know, it's compulsory, it's being levied and therefore we come to church we have to do it.

Well, it's not like that. Neither is church like a user pay organization, you know, we come here, we're benefiting from some services and therefore we feel like we need to pay for it.

No, giving is none of those models. Instead, we give because we want to be part of the work of the Lord. So, we need to understand that motivation before we can now turn to what I call the mechanics of giving.

And this is what Paul does in verses 2 and 3. It's related specifically to the collection in Jerusalem but I think there are principles that we can apply more generally. And the verse that I want to focus on is verse 2 where Paul says on the first day of every week, that's when they sort of gather for worship.

Each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up so that when I come, no collection will have to be made. Now, I think Paul's driving consideration was that he doesn't want things to be last minute.

[19 : 36] They've realized that there is need in Jerusalem and so he doesn't want to come and then have to, you know, people scramble and work out what collection is being made in order to give to Paul.

No, he wants for giving to be planned and that's the first principle that giving should be planned. We should be thinking ahead of time what we should be giving to the Lord. Secondly, just by way of passing, I think the phrase there, saving it up, is not about individual saving.

So it's not about individual members of the church putting it aside in their bank account and then giving it when Paul arrives. Rather, I think it is about the church saving it up, as in people giving to the church and then the church putting it aside until Paul gets to Corinth.

But the phrase I want to really hone in on is the phrase in keeping with your income. Now I think the situation in Corinth was that people in those times had income that was quite variable.

So they might be blacksmiths or bakers or whatever, and so their income would fluctuate depending on how many people came and used their services. So I think what Paul is saying here is that plan how much of your income you're going to give even though you may not know how much in advance you're going to earn.

[20 : 56] So I think what that means is set aside what you think is going to be a proportion of your income and work it out from there. So Paul is not saying, so what we're not to understand is Paul is not just asking us to look at the amount of our income but also the nature of it or the character of it.

Now what do I mean by that? Well, let me just use our illustration for our day. All of us are sort of in different situations. Some of us are in steady long-term employment.

Others are perhaps retired and on a pension. Others run their own business. Some of you might have casual employment looking to find more permanent work.

But Paul is saying not just determine your amount that you're going to give but according to how you receive your income that is the, in a sense, work out that that's how you're going to give.

So those of you in long-term employment or on a steady pension, you can work out how you're going to give week by week and then probably by direct debit. But some of you might be running your own business so it might be seasonal and from week to week things might be quite different.

[22 : 06] Well, work out at an appropriate time, maybe when you do your quarterly best or something, work out a proportion of how much you've earned in that quarter and then give that.

Now some of you, like I know, might be working in industries where there's a lot of performance related pay. So investment bankers or real estate agents, you get a very low base pay but then a lot of commission related pay.

Well, in that case, give, based on your base pay, but also think about how much of that performance related pay you're going to give.

So I think Paul was just saying, look at your income and look at all your income and then give according to that. It doesn't need to be one way for everyone, but work out how much you're going to give according to your income.

And I want to say that particularly, and I want to encourage particularly those people who are perhaps on very tight budgets on sort of employment that's casual from week to week. It's not so important how much you give.

[23 : 17] What is more important is the fact that you do give. And you give because you want to be part of the work of the Lord. This is a tangible way in which you can participate in the work of the Lord.

So I want to encourage you that even though you might not be thinking that it's going to make any difference, do it because it is important to the Lord. It is your way of being part of the work of the Lord.

So what we're going to do from this week is that we're actually going to we haven't done this for a while we're going to reintroduce the collection bags. And so those of you who have been giving by direct debit that's fine keep going. But I want to give an opportunity for those of you who have these sort of variable income to use this as an opportunity to work out each week how much you are going to give.

You may not be able to commit to direct debit but come each week prepared so that however much the Lord has blessed you for that week you can then think this is my way of giving to the work of the Lord.

Now the one thing I want to say, final thing, is that all I'm saying about this is only for people who are Christians. So if you're here today as a guest and you do not yet believe in Jesus, then please don't feel obliged to give at all.

[24 : 30] This is about giving to the work of the Lord. It's about giving because we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead, what we really want you to do if you're not a Christian is actually to hear the gospel and to come to know Jesus.

That's more important to us than your money. Lastly, and quite quickly, we'll go on to Paul saying that the third thing is to submit to godly leaders and that's in verses 15 to 17.

So Paul says that the household of Stephanas are the first converts or literally the first fruits in Corinth. As Jesus is the first fruits of the new creation, they were the first fruits because they were a promise of more Christians to come in Corinth.

And Paul says, submit to these leaders. Why? Because in those verses it says, because they have devoted themselves to the service of the Lord's people. See here again, Paul's concern for God's people, the Lord's people.

these people have the welfare of God's people at heart. And again, in verse 16, Paul says, submit to everyone else who does the same work, who joins in the work of the Lord and labors at it.

[25 : 45] That is, people who are putting 1 Corinthians 15 and 58 into practice. That is how we are to judge our leaders, people who have a concern for God's people and a concern to preach God's word.

And this is in sharp contrast to chapter 1, if you can remember that far, where the Corinthians were actually fighting about who was Paul, and I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos, I belong to Cephas.

No, Paul is saying, look, don't look to all these big name people outside the church or outside the local church. Look to your local leaders and support them. And I'm not saying all this so that you support me.

I'm getting a lot of support from you guys, but I'm saying this as it applies to all leaders in our church. People who lead Bible study groups, people who lead youth groups, vastly involved.

If you see people that are committed to God's people and to God's word, then support them. Support them because by doing that, you are doing the work of the Lord. Now, Paul wants all of this to be done in love.

[26 : 47] And so that's verse 14, which is that little jewel in the middle of that entire chapter. Do everything in love. love. That is Paul's motivation too in verse 24 because he sends my love to all of you at the end.

That is his parting greeting. See, when we ourselves experience God's love and God's grace, then we naturally want to give ourselves to the work out of love for him and also out of love for God's people.

In other words, we won't be asking, you know, I've done this, is that enough? No, the motivation of his love is, I've done this, what more can I do to do the work of the Lord?

When we believe in the gospel, we believe that the new creation is coming. Therefore, when we give ourselves to the work of the gospel, we are actually working for the new creation.

We are spreading the good news that the new creation is coming and we are helping people to enter into that new creation. We are helping people to be part of that new creation.

[27 : 52] I mean, that to me is the most exciting thing about the work of the Lord. We're not just investing in the here and now, we're actually investing in the future. We're actually investing in eternity.

So as I said last week, our labor in the Lord is not in vain because Christ has already won the victory by his resurrection from the dead. So tonight, as we conclude not just this chapter, but the entire letter, let me encourage you once again, get on board and if you're ready, on board, fantastic, keep going and give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord.

Let's pray. Dear God, we thank you that you have given us the gospel.

Actually, you have given us Jesus Christ who rose from the dead so that we have the gospel to share with others. Such a precious truth, such an amazing truth that transform our lives.

I pray and trust that, Lord, you will keep working in us, that the gospel and the truth of the gospel might keep working in us so that we will, in love, want to give ourselves to the work of the Lord.

[29 : 07] Bless those, Lord, who are working as evangelists, pastors, pastors, and preachers, help them to stand firm, help them to continue to care for God's people and God's word.

And we pray that all of us might do the same, look to one another as God's people and preach and teach the word of God to one another. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen.