

A COMMENTARY ON THE APOSTLE PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

According to the Homilies of St. John Chrysostom and other Fathers of the Church

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Chapter Sixteen

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Closing Concerns

BACKGROUND: In concluding this letter, in which he has advised the Christians of Corinth about many doctrinal and moral matters, Paul turns to practical concerns and to bringing the Corinthians up-to-date on news within the Church as a whole.

16:1. Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also. As an expression of the love described in Chapter 13, the Corinthians are to help provide for the poverty-stricken Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30; Rom 15:26). To encourage a spirit of togetherness and emulation, Paul tells them that he has instructed the Galatians to do likewise. The Church of today is likewise charged with the responsibility of being concerned with the well-being of the world-wide Church.

16:2. On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come. They are to set something aside each Sunday, the Lord's Day, for the purpose of helping others. The noting of Sunday suggests that already this day was the focal point for Christian worship (see Acts 20:7—note the long sermon). The Sabbath (Saturday) is still a holy day but as a day of preparation for Sunday, the day of the Resurrection of Christ.

In the new dispensation of grace...this Aholy@ and Achosen day@ (Lev 23:35) is called "the Lord's day" (Rev 1:10), because on it the more lordly and masterful events in Christ's life took place: the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Resurrection; and on this day the general resurrection of the dead will also take place. For it was on this day that God created the visible light, says *John of Damaskos*, and it will also be the day of Christ's Second Coming. Thus it will last for limitless ages: it is both day one and the eighth day, as being outside the other seven ages that have days and nights in them. PETER OF DAMASKOS¹

John Chrysostom extols the blessings of the Lord's Day and asserts that such a day is perfect for giving to help others:

. . . call to mind. . . what you attained to on this day: how all the unutterable blessings and that which is the root and the beginning of our life took place on this day. But not in this regard only is the season convenient for a zealous benevolence, but also because it has rest and immunity from toils: the souls when released from labors becoming readier and more apt to show pity. Moreover, the communicating also on that day in Mysteries so tremendous and immortal instills great zealousness.²

16:3-4. And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem. But if it is fitting that I go also, they will go with me. The Corinthians are to choose someone to take their contributions to Jerusalem. This is a precaution designed to avoid any hint of indiscretion with regard to Paul's use of the money collected (see 2 Cor 8:19-21).

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (a). Why is it important for Christians to avoid any hint of indiscretion as they pursue their various ministries and walks of life?

16:5-8. Now I will come to you when I pass through Macedonia (for I am passing through

Macedonia). And it may be that I will remain, or even spend the winter with you, that you may send me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not wish to see you now on the way; but I hope to stay a while with you, if the Lord permits. But I will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost. With the phrase *if the Lord permits* (or, as we say, *God willing*), Paul reveals that although he has plans for the near future, he is always mindful that God may have other plans for him and that His will prevails.

16:9. *For a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.* He plans to stay in Ephesus a little while because he has found an opportunity to be very effective in his ministry there. Progress however, is slow-going because of great opposition to his teaching of the Gospel.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (b). Why do those who do God's work always encounter difficulties and delays? How are we to react to this opposition?

16:10-12. *And if Timothy comes, see that he may be with you without fear; for he does the work of the Lord, as I also do. Therefore let no one despise him. But send him on his journey in peace, that he may come to me; for I am waiting for him with the brethren. Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to come to you with the brethren, but he was quite unwilling to come at this time; however, he will come when he has a convenient time.* Paul brings them up-to-date on the status of his fellow workers, a touching reminder that he is a part of a group of disciples working together as a team.

16:13-14. *Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. Let all that you do be done with love.* Paul's final words of wisdom: resist the tendency toward spiritual slumber and wavering intensity, fervent one moment, lukewarm or cold the next; have courage to speak out and to forge ahead with God's work; stay the course when difficulties arise. All of God's work, whether teaching, admonishing, administering, learning or laboring, must be done in a spirit of love for God and all His creations—else the effort is useless.

16:15-16. *I urge you, brethren—you know the household of Stephanas, that it is the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints—that you also submit to such, and to everyone who works and labors with us.* The household of Stephanas was the first to be converted in Achaia (1:16), a province which included Corinth and Athens. The members of this family thereafter devoted themselves to the building up of the Church. Paul advises the Corinthians to follow the example and the instruction of this family and others like them.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (c). To what practice of the Orthodox way of life do these verses correspond?

16:17-18. *I am glad about the coming of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, for what was lacking on your part they supplied. For they refreshed my spirit and yours. Therefore acknowledge such men.* These men were the ones who visited Paul while he was in Ephesus, informing him of the problems in Corinth, supplementing what he had heard from other sources. They then carried his response (this Epistle) back with them. Paul is pleased and encouraged by their willingness to take a long difficult journey for the good of the Church, as are the people of Corinth.

16:19. The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. Paul extends greetings to the Corinthians from the other churches in the area, and from Aquila and Priscilla, a courageous Christian couple (Acts 18:2-3, Rom 16:3-5), knowledgeable in the word of God (Acts 18:26). This is a further effort to emphasize the unity that should exist between all Christians (1 Cor 1:2).

16:20. All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. Christians have always greeted one another with this "holy kiss" on the cheek, in recognition of each other as members of the Body of Christ (Rom 16:16, 1 Pet 5:14, 1 Thess 5:26). When exchanged sincerely, this acknowledgment of oneness in-Christ can serve to dissolve tensions and dissension.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (d). It was a custom among the early Christians to exchange this "holy kiss" of love and peace during the Divine Liturgy, before the Confession of Faith. What is the symbolism of this custom?

16:21. The salutation with my own hand—Paul. Paul normally dictated his letters, adding his signature and a final word to assure authenticity (see 2 Thess 3:17).

16:22. If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed. O Lord, come! He who does not love Christ (and does not live a life which affirms this love) will be cursed to spend eternity separated from God. This will be a result not of God casting him away but rather of cutting himself off from the love of God:

...the person who has opted for the path of evil, and actually commits evil, should blame only himself, for no one can force him to commit it, since God created him with free will. Hence he will merit God's praise when he chooses the path of goodness; for he does so not from any necessity of his nature, as is the case with animals and inanimate things that participate passively in goodness, but as befits a being that God has honored with the gift of intelligence. We ourselves deliberately and willfully choose to do evil, being coached in it by its discoverer. God, who is good beyond goodness, does not force us, lest being forced and still disobeying we should be even more culpable. Nor does He take from us the freedom that in His goodness He has bestowed upon us. PETER OF DAMASKOS³

In the original text, the Hebrew words "maran atha" are used, meaning: "Our Lord is come," the Messiah has arrived, according to *Chrysostom*, or "our Lord cometh" (implying imminence of the Second Coming of Christ), or "O Lord, come!" (a plea that He come again soon) according to others.

In any case, Paul's words convey the glory of the Incarnation of Christ: He became man to give man a way back to the Kingdom. How can anyone reject this opportunity—or live an unchanged life of indifference to it?

16:23-24. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen. Paul began this Epistle with his wish that they be blessed with grace (1:3). He ends with the same thought, and sends his love to all. His having to chastise and correct them does not diminish his love for them as his spiritual children. On the contrary, because he loves them, he continues to be concerned for their spiritual well-being.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (e). True love includes concern for the spiritual as well as the physical well-being of our loved ones. Whom does God say we should love? What then is our most important obligation to them?

FOOD FOR THOUGHT COMMENTS

(a). Why is it important for Christians to avoid any hint of indiscretion as they pursue their various ministries and walks of life? Because those looking on who do not have strong faith can become disheartened and turn away from the Church if it appears that those closely involved with it are not honest and sincere. It must also be said that there are many who look for the chance to discredit the Church and those in it as an excuse for their living apart from it.

(b). Why do those who do God's work always encounter difficulties and delays? How are we to react to this opposition? The Devil does all he can to deter those who try to live a Christ-like life. Read Rev 12:12-17 (with the following symbolism):

woman: The Theotokos (Mother of God)/The Church
(see Gen 3:15, Jn 19:26).

child: Jesus/His teachings.

two wings of great eagle: prayer and fasting
(which strengthened Jesus when the Devil tried to tempt Him/Mt 4:1-11).

serpent spewed water out of his mouth: Satan spread heresies to water down Christ's teachings and divide the Church.

earth helped the Woman: The Fathers of the Church taught and wrote to protect the truth.

The angel of lights, Lucifer (now called the Devil, Satan), was cast out of Heaven for trying to overthrow God (Rev 12:7-9). He and his cohorts can never be a part of the Kingdom (12:8), so they want to cause as many as possible to suffer with them (12:12). Satan tried to destroy the Church with heresies (12:15), but the truth was preserved by the decisions of the Ecumenical councils and the writings of the Fathers of the Church, which explain and protect the true interpretations of scripture (12:16). As a last resort, the Devil does all in his power to thwart those who try to live their faith in God and His Son (12:17).

We should, therefore, not be surprised when we find doing God's work slow-going and difficult. We should never, however, give up—but rather *press toward the goal* (Phil 3:14). If we do our part, God will do His. He will never desert us (Phil 4:7, 13).

(c). To what practice of the Orthodox way of life do verses 15-16 correspond?

The Orthodox way of life includes learning about and trying to emulate the lives of the Saints—in that they sought always to emulate Christ. Having examples of others who have gone before us helps us to continue the struggle (Phil 3:17).

(d). It was a custom among the early Christians to exchange this "holy kiss" of love and peace during the Divine Liturgy, before the Confession of Faith. What is the symbolism of this custom? To receive the Body and Blood of Christ is to become one with Him. All who participate in this Mystery, therefore, are united through Him. The holy kiss of love and peace during the Divine Liturgy symbolizes this oneness and accord that should exist literally as well as figuratively among members of the Church.

In the early Church, "the greatest pains were taken to see that this...did not degenerate into a formality. ...the *Didache* (insisted) on the necessity of reconciling any fellow-Christians who might be at variance with each other before they could attend the Eucharist together," or it was considered that their "sacrifice [was] defiled." It was the duty of the Bishop and presbyters to mediate in all such disputes between members of their own church, and regular sessions were held for this purpose by what was virtually a Christian Sanhedrin of elders (presbyters) under the Christian high-priest (the Bishop). The Syrian *Didascalia of the Apostles* orders them to "Let your judgments be held on the second day of the week, that if perchance anyone should contest the sentence of your words, you may have space until the Sabbath to compose the matter, and may make peace between them on Sunday."⁴

(e). True love includes concern for the spiritual as well as the physical well-being of our loved ones. Whom does God say we should love? What then is our most important obligation to them? If we want long, healthy, happy lives for our loved ones on earth, we should even more want for them eternal life with God in His Kingdom. This means we must try to help them learn about God and what He expects of His people.

God calls us to love our neighbor (those with whom we come in contact in our lives/Mk 12:31), which includes those who might be considered our enemies (Mt 5:44). This means we should be concerned for their spiritual well-being also—the real test of love.

Amen.

¹ Palmer, etal. Vol. Three, p. 80.

² Schaff, "Homily XLIII," Vol. XII, p. 259.

³ Palmer, etal., p. 80.

⁴ Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, p. 105.