**HEALTHY CHURCHES DO PRACTICAL MINISTRY**

**(1 Corinthians 16:1-24)**

I heard about a preacher who one Sunday preached a sermon that had 17 major points. The next Sunday he apologized. He said, “To make for last Sunday’s message that had too many points, today’s sermon will be pointless.”

I am afraid that far too many preachers preach sermons that are pointless. The cause of pointless sermons is that preachers have a tendency to scratch where their people are not itching.

I have heard it said that only the preacher operates on the assumption that people come to church with a burning desire to know what happened to the Hittites and the Jebusites.

I am convinced that most people come to church for one of three reasons. Either they come wanting:

* to receive **healing** from yesterday’s hurts and failures,
* or to gain **help** with today’s struggles and problems,
* or to find **hope** for tomorrow’s challenges and fears.

I mentioned this morning that while I was preparing for tonight’s message, I turned to Gordon MacDonald’s book *Forging a Real-World Faith.* In his book, he includes a quote from a German theologian named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer lived during the dark days of World War II, but he didn’t survive them. He was executed by Hitler’s regime. He knew about both life and death in this real world. He once wrote, “It is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith . . . By this worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities.”

This Book is filled with great theological truths, with many lofty ideas, and with incredible historical facts. This Book is also intensely practical. The preacher’s task is to take this Book and our faith and show how they help us to navigate through the confusing twists and turns of life. None of us are going to escape this life without bearing some scars and hurts from the journey, but while we are here, we can help others along the way.

We have been looking at what healthy churches do. We come to the final chapter of 1 Corinthians and the ending message of this series. In 1 Corinthians 16 we learn, “Healthy Churches Do Practical Ministry.” We will look at five things we should be about doing.

1. **WE SHOULD PROVIDE FOR THE NEEDS OF THE NEEDY.**

The believers in Corinth were aware that Paul had instructed them to take up an offering for believers in Jerusalem who were facing a devastating drought. Here, Paul gives them some additional instructions as to how to receive this benevolence offering. He claims that the directions He is giving them were the very directions He gave to the churches of Galatia.

Look at the beginning of v. 2. The offering is to be **planned.** It is to be **systematic.** There is a day and time for the collection to be made. Sometimes, for things to get done, we have to plan them. If we say, “I will do such and such when I get around to it,” it seems that we never get around to it. Put it on the calendar.

If you can’t tell me when you are going to do something, I doubt you will get it done.

Paul also says, “each one of you to put something aside and store it up.” The offering is to be **universal** and **intentional.** Paul didn’t just ask the rich people to give. Everybody is to give. If you have been on the receiving end of God’s blessing, you have a responsibility to pass it on. And you have to set it aside. You have to be intentional. I have found that money I don’t set aside gets spent. Does that happen to you, too?

“As he may prosper,” wrote Paul. Our giving should be **proportional.** The word tithe means 10%. The OT teaches tithing. It gets confusing because in the OT there was more than one kind of tithe. There was the tithing of the crops, the tithing of the fruit trees, and the tithing of ones’ herds. You were required to go to Jerusalem to give your tithe, but sometimes you were allowed to do so locally.

I have not found any single next in the NT, however, that clearly teaches tithing, but more than one passage teaches proportional giving. We give in proportion to the way God has blessed us. I think giving 10% is a good place to start. As God blesses us materially, we can go upward from there.

Look also at vv. 3-4. I think Paul is teaching that we should give with **built-in accountability.** We want to make sure that our giving is handled honestly. Paul wasn’t going to take the money. That would open him up to suspicion. I’ve made it a practice in my ministry to have nothing or as little as possible to do with the offerings that are given.

Sometimes, people give me a check or cash that didn’t make it to the offering plate. I immediately put in an offering envelope, seal it, write down the name of the giver and the amount and put it on the secretary’s desk.

God’s designated means of supporting the church and for the church to help others is the matter of giving. It has been said that we are never more like God than when we give. “For God so love that world that He gave . . .”

Both this morning and tonight I mentioned pastor and author Gordon MacDonald. I once read an article he wrote in which he mentioned an incident that transformed him from “giving as merely an institutional obligation” into being a cheerful giver. Listen to what he wrote:

The process began when my wife, Gail, and I made a mission’s trip to West Africa. On the first Sunday of our visit, we joined a large crowd of desperately poor Christians for worship. As we neared the church, I noticed that almost every person was carrying something. Some hoisted cages of noisy chickens, others carried baskets of yams, and still others toted bags of eggs or bowls of cassava paste.

“Why are they bringing all that stuff?” I asked one of our hosts. “Watch!” she said.

Soon after the worship began, the moment came when everyone stood and poured into the aisles, singing, clapping, even shouting. The people began moving forward, each in turn bringing whatever he had brought to a space in the front. Then I got it. This was West African offering time. The chickens would help others get a tiny farm business started. The yams and the eggs given could be sold in the marketplace to help the needy. The cassava paste would guarantee that someone who was hungry could eat.

I was captivated. I’d never seen a joyful offering before. Obviously, my keep-money-under-the-radar policy would not have worked in that West African church. Those African believers, although they never knew it, had moved me. I began to understand that giving—whether yams or dollars—was not an option for Christ-followers. Rather it was an indication of the direction and the tenor of one’s whole life.

Giving is just one practical way that we can serve the Lord, but there are others.

1. **WE SHOULD PROTECT THE MINISTRY OF THE MINISTERS.**

Beginning in v. 5 through v. 13, Paul mentions a couple of individuals who were active in serving the Lord. In addition to himself, Paul names Timothy and Apollos. He tells them how to treat Timothy in vv. 10-11. Unlike Paul, it seems that Timothy did not have a forceful personality. He was young. He may have been a bit unsure of himself. Paul wants the people to treat him with kindness. In a very real sense, churches can make or break young ministers.

Right now, one of the premiere coaches in NCAA Division 1 football is Nick Saban, the head coach of the Alabama Crimson Tide. Long before Saban came on the scene, "Bear" Bryant was the man. In his 38 years seasons as a head coach, Bryant took 29 teams to bowl games and led his teams to 15 conference championships. In the 1960’s and 1970’s, no school won more games than Alabama (193-32-5). As one of his colleagues said, “He wasn't just a coach; he was *the* coach.”

John Croyle, an All-American defensive end on the 1973 national championship team, played for the Bear, and was deeply impacted by the man. John told about one of Coach Bryant’s pregame speeches.

Coach Bryant paced in front of his assembled team as the band played for the capacity crowd waiting outside in the stadium. He made eye contact with each player as he spoke the following words:

In this game, there are going to be four or five plays that will determine the outcome of this contest. Four or five plays that will swing the momentum toward us, or away from us. I don’t know which plays these will be. You don’t know which plays these will be. All you can do is go out there and give all that you have on each and every play. If you are doing that on one of those crucial plays, and you catch your opponent giving less, that play will swing things in our direction. And if we rise to the occasion like that, on those four or five plays, we are gonna leave here today a winner.

We can be winners for the Lord if we give our all on every interaction we have with those the Lord brings to us. Stay alert. Give your best. Whatever you do, do it with love.

1. **WE SHOULD PROMOTE THE SERVICE OF THE SERVANTS.**

Look at vv. 15-18. Notice the name Stephanas. This is not the first time we have encountered that name. In addition to being found in the last chapter of this book, it was also used by Paul in the first chapter of this letter (1:16).

Paul is doing here what lower elementary teachers do. Instead of calling the names of those who are acting up, teachers will find someone doing things right and bring attention to them. “Oh, I love the way Johnny is working quietly at his desk . . . Suzy is coloring her paper without talking to her neighbor just like I asked.”

“Look at the household of Stephanas,” Paul says, “They aren’t trying to gain power and influence for themselves. They are humbling serving the people of the church.”

Look at v. 17. It appears that these three men had brought a letter from Corinth to Paul. They waited around for Paul to respond, and they would take his letter back with them. In the meantime, Paul was enjoying their company. They had been a source of refreshment. Paul is saying that these are the kind people you want to honor.

Recognize the people who are quietly going about doing what they can with what God has given them.

The heavyweight boxing champion Muhammed Ali dubbed himself “the greatest.” In many ways, he was. He was fast, powerful, and elusive in the ring. Outside the ring he was articulate, funny, and brash. He truly had a heavyweight ego.

A former boxing writer named Harold Conrad told about a time he visited a women's prison with Ali. “All the inmates lined up,” wrote Conrad. “They were ooh-ing and aah-ing as he went along. There were some good-looking ones. But he kissed only the ugly ones.” After they left the prison, Conrad asked the fighter to explain why he chose to kiss only those women. “Because no one ever kisses ‘em.’ Now they can remember that Ali kissed ‘em.”

That is the kind of thing you might expect Ali to say, but there is something beautiful about that, too. All of us have an inner need to be recognized.

One man observed, “Straight-A students get compliments. Good athletes receive cheers. But average people don’t expect such attention. They just tend to blend in with the woodwork.”

Everybody needs a pat on the back, a smile, a hug, a word of affirmation, and recognition. Let’s recognize those who are serving others without any expectation of reward.

1. **WE SHOULD PRACTICE THE GREETINGS OF THE GREETERS.**

Look at vv. 19-21. There is a lot of greeting going on in these verses. The Church at Corinth was being greeted by the churches of Asia, by Aquila and Priscilla whom they knew, by their brothers who were with Paul, and by Paul himself. Now, Paul encourages them to greet one another.

Greeting others is a form of hospitality. In his book *Outlive Your Life,* Max Lucado emphasizes the importance and the ministry of extending hospitality in the church. He wrote:

Long before the church had pulpits and baptisteries, she had kitchens and dinner tables. Even a casual reading of the New Testament unveils the house as the primary tool of the church. The primary gathering place of the church was the home. Consider the genius of God’s plan. The first generation of Christians was a tinderbox of contrasting cultures and backgrounds. At least fifteen different nationalities heard Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Jews stood next to Gentiles. Men worshiped with women. Slaves and masters alike, sought after Christ. Can people of such varied backgrounds and cultures get along with each other?

We wonder the same thing today. Can Hispanics live in peace with Anglos? Can Democrats find common ground with Republicans? Can a Christian family carry on a civil friendship with the Muslim couple down the street? Can divergent people get along?

The early church did—without the aid of sanctuaries, church buildings, clergy, or seminaries. They did so through the clearest of messages (the Cross) and the simplest of tools (the home).

Not everyone can serve in a foreign land, lead a relief effort, or volunteer at the downtown soup kitchen. But who can’t be hospitable? Do you have a front door? A table? Chairs? Bread and meat for sandwiches? Congratulations! You just qualified to serve in the most ancient of ministries: hospitality.

Something holy happens around a dinner table that will never happen in a sanctuary. In a church auditorium you see the backs of heads. Around the table you see the expressions on faces. In the auditorium one person speaks; around the table everyone has a voice. Church services are on the clock. Around the table there is time to talk.

Hospitality opens the door to uncommon community. It’s no accident that hospitality and hospital come from the same Latin word, for they both lead to the same result: healing. When you open your door to someone, you are sending this message: “You matter to me and to God.” You may think you are saying, “Come over for a visit.” But what your guest hears is, “I’m worth the effort.”

People are worth the effort for us to great them and to show them hospitality.

1. **WE SHOULD PURSUE THE PRAYERS OF THE PRAYERFUL.**

Paul ends his letter with a prayer. Often, in his letters, Paul breaks out in prayer. I have a book in my library entitled, *Gleanings from Paul: The Prayers of the Apostle.* In his book, Arthur Pink comments on the many prayers Paul prayed.

Look at the end of v. 22. This appears to be an early Christian prayer. It is actually an Aramaic phrase. That is the language of Jesus’ first disciples. A transliteration of that phrase comes over as one word: Maranatha.

Paul closes by wishing God’s grace and love upon the believers in Corinth. That is what they needed. That is what we need. Let’s pursue those things—prayerfully and diligently.

Notice the final word of the letter—*Amen.* It means “truly” or “indeed.” I have heard others say that it means, “Let it be.”

This morning I read to you from the first page of the first chapter of MacDonald’s book, *Forging a Real-World Faith.* I want to close this message by reading to you from the last page of the last chapter of his book. He includes a quote from St. Cyprian. Cyprian lived at the end of the 3rd Century. He as a bishop at Carthage. He wrote a letter to a friend named Donatus, who it seems was not yet a believer.

This seems a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden under the shadow of these vines. But if I climbed some great mountain and looked out over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see. Brigands on the high road, pirates on the seas, in the amphitheaters, men murdered to please the applauding crowds, under all roofs, misery and selfishness. It is really a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world.

Yet in the midst of it, I have found a quiet and holy people. They have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians . . . and I am one of them.

To those who are one of them, keep on living a good life, a godly life, in this incredibly, bad world.