

May 15, 2022
Building Bridges
1 Corinthians 16:5-24

The High-Level Bridge includes 33 towers, 67 horizontal girders and trusses, thousands of individual pieces of steel, and an estimated 1,400,000 rivets. What if an engineer miscalculated something? Imagine if those who built the bridge didn't make the concrete foundations strong enough? Or forgot one piece of steel in a tower or girder? Or cut corners with cut-rate rivets? (Coincidentally, the High-Level Bridge was built the same year (1909), that construction began on the *Titanic* – we know how that turned out!).

In a great engineering work, like the High-Level Bridge, everything from the concrete footings to the 1.4 million little rivets are essential to hold the whole thing together. Any mistake and you can't cross the bridge. The whole thing might come tumbling down ...

As Paul finishes up his letter to the church in Corinth, he wants them to think about what it is that holds us together as a church. He wants us think about the nuts and bolts of how we follow Jesus in a non-Christian society. He also wants us to think about how we can be bridge-builders because we want people to know Jesus. Paul identifies five key components to a strong, bridge-building church: "***Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong. And do everything with LOVE***" (1 Corinthians 16:13-14).

1. ***Be on guard.*** There were a lot of threats OUTSIDE the church in Corinth: other religions, Jewish opposition, persecution by Roman authorities, and the hedonism of a cosmopolitan port city with thousands of temple prostitutes. But in this letter, Paul is more concerned with threats INSIDE the church – people who cause divisions, who either have ultra-legalistic ethics or no ethics, who obsess about non-salvation issues and overlook the good news of Jesus, who are judgmental, proud, self-centred, and lack the amazing grace and love Jesus modelled. These people sap the church's strength. They don't build bridges; they build walls.
2. ***Stand firm in the faith.*** Keep the risen Jesus at the centre of your life and our church. Jesus has risen. That changes everything. God loves us, the kingdom of God has come, our sins are forgiven, death is defeated, God's love and mercy and power are real. We have good news of new life in Jesus NOW and forever. Ours is a bridge-building faith. We want to invite people to cross over and find life in Jesus.
3. ***Be courageous.*** God, our Creator and loving Father, is with us. The risen Jesus is with us. His Spirit of power is within us. We don't need to fear anything. Our lives, our hopes, our families, our church, our futures are safe in His hands.
4. ***Be strong.*** The power of God, which raised Jesus from the dead, is with us. We don't face the present of the future alone. The God of the universe, the risen Saviour, the Spirit of God is with us now and always. He will never leave us.

5. ***And do everything with LOVE***. That is the key central truss in the church. We can be on guard, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, and be strong ... but without love, we aren't a church of Jesus. We fail in our core mission. Like a bridge with a key piece missing, we're useless. Love. This isn't the first time Paul has talked about "love" in this letter. The centerpiece of this entire letter, of course, is 1 Corinthians 13:

"If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

"Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever! ... Three things will last forever – faith, hope, and love – and the greatest of these is love."

Notice Paul's teaching on love is all about love-in-action. This is not about romance or sappy sentimentalism. This is rubber-hits-the-road practical checklist of things we actually **DO** to love people around us. We are patient, kind, not jealous, boastful, proud, or rude. We don't demand our own way, get irritable, or keep record of being wronged ...

Unfortunately, this talks much easier than it walks. In the news and our social media, we see criticism is easier than affirmation. Condemnation is easier than encouragement. Judgment is easier than grace. Sadly, the church is not exempt. We can be impatient, unkind, proud, rude, and irritable. We can insist on our own way. We can be unloving.

Paul's attitude is entirely different. He doesn't shirk from taking on those who are leading the church astray. But most often his mention of others is in a spirit of love.

The people-parts of this chapter remind us that people are important – **ALL** people are important. People like Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, otherwise unknown and unrecognized, are worthy of recognition. These are everyday people who might easily be passed over, but Paul singles them out for praise:

"Would you do me a favor, friends, and give special recognition to the family of Stephanas? You know, they were among the first converts in Greece, and they've put themselves out, serving Christians ever since then. I want you to honor and look up to people like that: companions and workers who show us how to do it, giving us something to aspire to. I want you to know how delighted I am to have Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus here with me.

They partially make up for your absence! They've refreshed me by keeping me in touch with you. Be proud that you have people like this among you. (1 Corinthians 16:15-18).

Regarding another young man, Timothy, Paul writes, *"If Timothy shows up, take good care of him. Make him feel completely at home among you. He works so hard for the Master. Don't let anyone disparage him. (1 Corinthians 16:10-11).* We know Timothy was young (see 1 Timothy 4:12) and suspect may have been timid (see 2 Timothy 1:5-8). Paul singles him out for his efforts. Elsewhere Paul comments he has no one else like him (Philippians 2:20).

We may skip over Timothy, Apollos, Stephanus, Fortunatus, Achaicus, and the rest, but **Paul** doesn't. **God** certainly doesn't. Neither does God skip over you. Or me. He loves each of us, individually and personally, in ways we cannot imagine. He knows each of us, loves each of us, and is with each of us, always. Each of us is God's beloved son or daughter.

What a difference might it make if we followed Paul's example of love? What if we saw other people and chose to honour and affirm them? Encouragement and thanks are not difficult. But they are all too rare. What if we try to really encourage, thank, buildup, come alongside, and bless people?

What if we put the interests of others above our own? Listen to what Paul writes to his friends in Philippi, another Greek city:

"Make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose.

"Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.

"You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

*"Though he was God,
he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to.
Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;
he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being.
When he appeared in human form,
he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross.*

*"Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor
and gave him the name above all other names,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father....*

"Do everything without complaining and arguing, so that no one can criticize you. Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people. Hold firmly to the word of life ..." (Philippians 2:1-16)

To yet another church, Paul writes, *"Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. **Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony**"* (Colossians 3:12-14). Is love important to Paul? Absolutely. It's absolutely essential.

How do we follow Jesus in a non-Christian society? How we can be bridge-builders, helping people know Jesus? **Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong.** But, most of all, **do everything with love.** That's the key, central truss, without which all the other things amount to nothing.

There are a lot of churches who are good at being on guard, standing firm in the faith, being courageous and strong. But we can also be impatient, unkind, proud, rude, irritable, and self-centred. We can insist on our own way. We can be unloving. We are like the High-Level Bridge with a truss missing. Without love, there is no logical way for people to cross the bridge and meet Jesus. Without love, we are just noisy gongs or clanging cymbals. When people check us out, they may find many fine things, but if they don't find love, none of the rest matters. They won't meet Jesus. Because God is love (1 John 4).

Paul says, do everything with love. Then we are good news to our world. People really see Jesus is here, alive, among us. We're different. Genuine love – real unconditional love, mercy, grace, forgiveness – is so rare in our culture. When we are people who love as Jesus loved, people take notice. **They'll know we are Christians by our ... love.**

Love one another, agree wholeheartedly with each other, work together with one mind and purpose. Don't be selfish. Don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests but take an interest in others. Do everything without complaining and arguing. Live clean, innocent lives, shining like bright lights in the world. Hold firmly to the word of life. Build bridges. Be like Jesus.

Love. Be patient. Be kind. Don't be jealous or boastful or proud or rude. Don't demand your own way. Don't be irritable. Keep no record of being wronged. Do not rejoice about injustice but rejoice whenever the truth wins out. Never give up on people. Never lose faith in people. Always be hopeful. Let your love endure through every circumstance. Build Bridges. Be like Jesus.