



How to Live

1 Corinthians 16:5-9

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I said last week, as we started our look at Chapter 16, that these final words of instructions from St. Paul to the Corinthians break down into three areas of application for us. First, how to give, then how to live, and finally, how to live with others. We looked at the first four verses last week and saw the practical teaching on our giving there. I want, this week, to look at verses five to nine and “how to live.”

As a priest, one of the areas of life that people ask me about most frequently has to do with planning. Questions like, “What should I do about such and such?” Or, “How should I prepare for this or that?” These verses give us a picture, even if it’s only a very brief one, of how the Apostle Paul operated and planned, and in this glimpse of his own thought and planning he helps us to answer our own questions about what to plan and what to schedule and what to commit to in future. Look at verses 5 to 9:

I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

We can get so up-tight about our planning and yet consider how gloriously indefinite Paul’s plans are here – how willing he is to let God direct him in his ministry. He knows what he *wants* to do, but as he tells them his plans he also scatters in phrases like, “wherever I go” and “if the Lord permits”.

Paul’s attitude is very different from the attitudes we see around us – even in the Church. A few months ago I was talking

with another priest and in our conversation we go tot talking about a particular book on pastoral ministry. It happens to be a favourite for both of us. It’s an excellent book. But as we were talking about it my friend asked me, “So how’s your five-year plan coming along?” You see the author of this particular book is really big on extended planning and includes a section where he helps pastors asses where their parish is at and where it needs to go and then create a very specific long-range plan to get from point A to point B.

Now as much as this happens to be the best book I’ve ever read on pastoral ministry, I take exception to the part on that kind of planning. It’s not that it’s all bad, but even before I’d entered parish ministry, I read that part of the book and was asking, “That’s great to have a vision for where you want your parish to go, but what if God has other plans? Or, “What if God has different plans than you do in order to make it happen?” The Church needs to be rooted be committed to letting God lead and to doing things God’s way. That’s one of the great failure of the modern “Church Growth” movement. That whole movement is rooted in pragmatism – in a man-centred view of “what works”, which is why so many modern churches don’t seem to look at much more than the numbers. If you’ve got a lot of people, you must be doing something right and if you don’t, well, then you’re doing something wrong. It gets people into church not necessarily by preaching the gospel and making new converts and disciples, but by appealing to the flesh – turning worship into entertainment and preaching pop-psychology instead of God’s Word – and it never stops to ask if all those numbers are actually growing the kingdom – if people are being converted to Christ or if they’re being converted to programmes, self-help messages, and “worship-tainment.”

So when my friend and I got onto the topic of this particular book on pastoring my friend asked, “So how’s your five-year plan going.” And I said, “Well, frankly, I don’t have one – at least not in the sense that the book describes.” I said, “I have some ideas about where I’d like to see things go. I know what some of the needs are in the parish and know that there are things that need to happen or change or grow, but on the whole my commitment isn’t to a fixed plan. My commitment is to be faithful in consistently apply the

principles that God teaches in his Word and to keep on doing that until I die or Jesus comes back for us.”

Brothers and sisters, this is what I pray each day for us as a congregation: That the gospel would be clearly, faithfully, and accurately presented here each Sunday and at every other service or function we have here. That we, all of us, would be growing in our maturity in the faith and that we as a church would grow in love for each other, in holiness, and in sound doctrine so that our witness and testimony in the Comox Valley will be distinctively pure, beautiful, and attractive to unbelievers. That sinners will be converted and our church built up through our preaching of and witness to the gospel. And that God will bring each of us opportunities to share our faith with others and that we will all be faithful and bold in taking advantage of them. Those are all the things that Paul prayed for the churches that were in his care. He prayed these things because that was his long-term plan. He was never certain exactly how those things would come about, how things were going to play out, or exactly where he’d end up. He writes that he had a strong desire to go to Rome. At the end of the letter to the Roman Church he talks about how he wanted to visit them on his way to Spain. Spain was the other side of the known world and going there was an ambitious plan. But in the end Paul also knew that God would direct him and that his plans always had to be open to God’s leading. He had to be *flexible*. Notice in verse 5 that the practical upshot of Paul’s flexibility is that his immediate goals were short-range ones. That’s the first point here. He says:

I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you... (1 Corinthians 16:5b-6a)

Paul’s not planning out very far – almost certainly less than a year. He was writing this from Ephesus, probably some time around Passover and his plan was to stay there until Pentecost, which came fifty days later. He then planned to go to Macedonia, in northern Greece, to visit the churches there (in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea) and then to finally head south to Corinth, where he might spend the winter. He wanted to deliver that collection for the church in Jerusalem that we talked about last week, but it wasn’t safe to travel on the sea in winter. Because of that he hoped to winter in

Corinth, working to restore the broken relationship with the church there and then they could provide him with support and companions for his trip to Jerusalem in the Spring. At most we're talking about a year here. Paul isn't making five-year plans. He's planning out as far as he can reasonably see, and planning to do what makes sense based on where he's at and what the needs of the churches were. If you've got your Bible, turn over to James 4:13 and look at what we read there about planning:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." (James 4:13-15)

It's okay to make plans about where you think you should probably be and where you should probably go, but limit it to the short-range or to a future that you can reasonably see. Don't feel like you have to plan everything for the next five, ten, twenty, or fifty years. None of us has any idea where we'll be then.

I'm one of those people who doesn't particularly like change or uncertainty. When I was in school I used to get terribly stressed out at the beginning of each new semester because I had new teachers and I didn't know what to expect. I used to pick my schedule for the new semester based mostly on how I could set things up so that I'd end up with as many of the same teachers as possible. Ask Veronica. The times I get the most stressed are the times when something new happens and I don't know what to expect. I've learned to put those situations in God's hands, but I can get testy when people keep reminding me of them after I've given them to God. If my world were perfect, everything would be planned out and everything would fit into nice, neat boxes. But God doesn't work that way. When we try to plan it all out. When we try to put everything into a box, what we're doing is trying to remove God from our lives. God doesn't always work the way we expect him to. One of the things we see throughout the book of Acts is that God has his own plan and it doesn't always

square with the plans of even the most godly of men.

Charlie Fordham led our teaching times at Diocesan Retreat this past year when some of us went to Capernwray on Thetis Island. He illustrated this really well. He told us that a few years before, Thetis experienced a bad summer drought. Now when all the students are gone from Capernwray for the summer, they operate the school as a summer camp. He said that summer the wells on the property were almost dry. It hadn't rained in ages. He stood there leaning on the fence, watching the cars drive off the ferry on their way to family camp. And all the time he was thinking that if something didn't change he was going to have to send them all home because there wouldn't be any water left in a week or two. He said he leaned on that fence watching everyone arrive and prayed fervently for rain as he had been for weeks. Like Elijah we looked at the sky for a cloud, even a little one the size of a man's hand. And yet it didn't rain. As it turned out, in the weeks that followed, their facilities folks noticed a particularly wet spot of ground, which didn't make sense with the drought. They checked it out and found a spring. In all the years the property had been in use, no one had ever found that spring. They sank a well, and he said to this day it's never run dry. His point was that God has his own plans that are far better than ours. Charlie was praying for rain, even though it would take a whole season of rain to fill the ground aquifers. Rain wasn't the answer. God knew better. We just have to be willing to be flexible enough to let him work. So Paul's goals were short-range, but notice he was also flexible. That's the second point. Look at verses 6 and 7:

...perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter...[and then at the end of verse 7]...I hope to spend some time with you.

Paul knew what he *wanted* to do, but even having his own desires for ministry, he didn't set his plans in stone. The reason for that is that the Apostle Paul understood one of the most important principles of life and work in God's kingdom. Look at the end of verse seven. He told the Corinthians what he *wanted* to do – and was even making plans based on what he *wanted* to do – but then he says:

...if the Lord permits.

This is what changes everything. Paul knew that he wasn't his own boss. He knew that as a servant of Jesus, he was doing his work for a master, not for himself. Jesus doesn't want unthinking or lazy workers – he expects us to plan and to work according to the principles he teaches us, *but* he also wants us to leave him free to change our plans if he needs to. As human beings we only know so much and can only see so far. God sees the big picture. We need the humility to grant that his plans are usually better than ours will be because he knows more than we do. We need to make our plans and still be free to let God work.

It used to be very common to hear Christians say things like, "Lord willing, I'm planning to do this or that tomorrow," or, "I'm headed off to such and such place next week, if the Lord wills." If you read the writing and letters of many Christians from ages past, you'll see them say this all the time. In fact, they even came up with shorthand for it. You'll often run across the letters "D.V." That's short for *Deo volente* – "Lord willing".

These days it seems that the only Christians you hear saying this sort of thing are our consciously Calvinist brothers and sisters, but they continue to do so precisely because they have a strong understand and sense in their lives that God is sovereign – that he's in control, not them. Today the sovereignty of God is being attacked, even in the Church. If we're going to be faithful, we need to step back and allow some flexibility in our plans. We need to remember that God *is* sovereign and we need to give him permission to take control in our lives.

The third principle is in the latter part of verse 6. Paul says he wanted to visit the Corinthians,

...so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go.

He knew he was going somewhere, but even as he made his plans, he grants that at this point he has no certainty as to where he's ultimately headed – and yet even as he has no certainty of the destination, he trusts that God will make provision for him for the journey. That's

the third principle and it's an important one to remember as we do God's work. If you set out to do work for the kingdom, you can be confident that God has promised to make available whatever it will take to get the job done. If you're like me, you don't like uncertainty – if you're going to start a project, you want to know before you start that you're going to have everything you need to finish. But God often expects us to step out in faith – start doing the work and trust that because it's his work, he'll supply the needs as we go along. We need to learn to venture out on the power and provision of God. The key is to make sure before we start that this is really the work God wants us to do. We need to consider if there's really a need for what we think we need to do; we need to make sure that what we plan to do squares with Scripture; and we should get input from the Church and from our brothers and sisters. If God is really working, he usually gives some kind of consensus to his people.

There's a fourth principle in verse 8:

But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost.

Paul was writing to them from Ephesus. It's not clear exactly how far away Pentecost was, but Paul was probably writing this around the Passover, which, again, was fifty days before. Pentecost was the time of year when the weather started improving. During the winter the Aegean Sea got very rough and so most of the shipping shut down, but Pentecost was the time when it started up again. Paul's taking practical precautions and as he makes his plans for ministry he takes into account the normal circumstances of life. That's point four. If everyday circumstances close a door, don't keep beating on it to open it up. God will open it back up if and when he wants to.

Finally, the fifth point is in verse 9:

...for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

You see, there's always an open door for ministry somewhere. The normal route to Corinth was by sea, but circumstances didn't make that possible. Paul could have forced that door open and travelled overland to Corinth, but instead he saw the

closed door and looked for some other door that was open. How often does God close a door to us, but because we're so hung up on our own plans, we completely miss the wide-open door directly behind us. All we have to do is start looking around us to see where God *is* working. Paul really wanted to go to Corinth, but it wasn't practically possible. But while he was waiting, God opened another door for ministry in Ephesus. Acts 19 tells the story. The Jews kicked Paul out of the synagogue, so he rented a hall and was teaching there, according to one manuscript, six days every week, all day long. And the people flocked to hear him teaching God's Word. In fact, Paul's ministry had such an amazing impact in Ephesus that the gospel exploded all over the province of Asia. Churches popped up in Colossae, Laodicea, Sardis, Pergamum, and a whole host of cities. And it happened because Paul was willing to sit tight where he was instead of trying to force his own plans to happen.

And notice that he says there were many adversaries. Persecution isn't the same thing as a closed door. Ephesus was one of the centres of worship of the goddess Diana. All sorts of false worship and immoral things took place in that temple, plus it was the centre of banking and commerce for the city. The newly formed church stood against all the traffic of that temple. But on top of that the Jewish community bitterly opposed Paul's work in Ephesus. Against all that opposition, that little church stood her ground – in every way contrary to what Ephesus stood for – and yet those Christians stood their ground with such power and effectiveness that they started to overturn the city's whole economic system. The silversmiths got upset because all the people turning to Christ were cutting into their idol-making business.

Those two things were evidence to Paul that ministry was needed: a wide door and opposition. Remember, we're building God's kingdom and in doing that we're fighting a war with the enemy. Beware a wide door when there are no adversaries and no opposition – it may be a trick of the enemy to distract you from the real work of the kingdom. Whenever the real work is being done, he's going to oppose us. But also beware heavy opposition and many adversaries where there is no open door for ministry. Jesus himself told his

disciples, "if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town" (Matthew 10:14). Remember we may be doing the ground-work, but God is the one who makes it effective. You and I can never convert anyone to the gospel, we're simply given the task of sharing the message. It's the Spirit's job to move the heart. We need to be willing to let God direct us to the places where he is already at work by his Spirit – where there's already an open door.

Again, here are the four principles to live by: First, don't plan farther than is reasonable. Second, be flexible in your plans. Expect God to redirect you now again and welcome it when he does. Third, trust God to provide as you do his work and follow his leading. Fourth, don't ignore circumstances. If the door is closed, don't try to pry it open. Turn around and look for the door that's open. And finally, fifth, when God does open a door, expect opposition from the enemy as you claim new ground for the kingdom.

Brothers and sisters, Christians spend a lot of time trying to divine the will of God as if it's not clear, but the fact is that God's will *is* clear. More than anything else he simply wants us to grow in our knowledge and love of him and to grow more and more into the likeness of Christ. Commit to doing that in the place where he has put you and let these simple principles guide you. Paul didn't stress out over what he had to do. He simply did the work of the kingdom wherever he was and went where it made sense for him to go. We simply need to know God well enough to do that which pleases him and be open enough to let him lead us.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, thank you for these down-to-earth and practical words that you've given us through St. Paul. Remind us each day that we walk with a living God who works with us and walks beside us, giving us support and direction. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.