

From The Pulpit Of



IMMANUEL
BAPTIST
CHURCH

Planning as the Lord Permits

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Series: 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 16:5-12

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Text

⁵ I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, ⁶ and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. ⁷ For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. ⁸ But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹ for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

¹⁰ When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. ¹¹ So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers.

¹² Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity.

Introduction

Some of you tend to be lazy and disorganized. You're kind of wandering through life, wasting time. You're chill, but maybe a little too chill. Unmotivated. You could use a little more drive, more pep in your step, more passion and purpose. You could be helped by structuring your days a little more carefully, setting goals for your weeks, mapping out your month, calendaring your year, having a 5-year plan, thinking about where you're going with your life.

Some of you are the opposite. You're a bit high strung, uptight. You have a chart for everything. Nap times for your kids are rigid. Your summer vacation has been planned out for months and you have a detailed itinerary. But you struggle to rest. You need help unwinding. You're often stressed out. People around you feel stressed out. You're a control freak. You get worked up about details. Nobody ever really meets your standards.

God, in the Bible, calls us to something different than both of these approaches to life. It shows us that there's a way to have joyful productivity, humble ambition, to be relaxed *and* resolved, driven but not uptight. The Bible envisions the Christian life as not passive, but at the same time still submissive to God's will. We see this very clearly in the way Paul relates his travel plans at the end of 1 Corinthians, which we're looking at together today. In short, what we're going to see is just this: **you can be ambitious, without being anxious.**

Doesn't that sound nice?

Let's pray...

Paul

This is our 42nd sermon in the book of 1 Corinthians. It's been good, hasn't it? We will finish up next week and then resume our journey through the OT with the book of Ruth. Right now, we're in that part of Paul's letters where he's not really making an argument as much as he's making chit chat. He's covered his main topics for writing and now he's wrapping up with some newsy information. But even here there is something for us to learn. It's in the Bible for a reason. I like trying to figure out what that reason is. That's how we should approach every part of Scripture – *Lord, why did you put this here?* And then stare at it until you see it.

As I've stared at this section, I noticed three individuals mentioned: Paul, Timothy, and Apollos. And so those will be the three sections of this sermon. But all three sections are really showing us something about Paul. And it all shows us that here was a man with a plan... that he held loosely. Paul was proactive while also being tentative. He took initiative, and yet he trusted God. And Paul by his example shows us that **you can be ambitious, without being anxious**. I want to be like that. How did he do it?

First, Paul's plans were kingdom-minded. He wasn't making plans for his own comfort or climbing some corporate ladder. He wasn't building his own platform. He was all in on the kingdom of God. And kingdom plans are the kind that **can be ambitious without being anxious**.

I hope you can see clearly here that Paul is making plans. I'm not preaching a sermon on a topic I want to talk about. I'm trying to pay attention to the text. Verse 5 – “I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia.” The verb “[p]ass through points to a systematic tour of the various Macedonian churches.”¹ And then, as he foreshadowed in 4:19, Paul intends to pay a visit to Corinth. He's thought this through, mapped a course. He has an agenda.

But it's not a Rick Steves kind of tour of Europe. Paul's not just sightseeing. “As Paul lays out his plans, it is clear that he thinks strategically for the sake of the gospel.”² He wants to strengthen churches in Macedonia. He wants to help the church in Corinth. His heartbeat is the spread of God's glory through the local church. Is that yours? Is your life plan a kingdom-minded plan, thinking strategically about how you can play your part in the advance of the gospel?

You may think that this kind of talk just applies to “professional Christians” – pastors, deacons, denominational workers, missionaries? What about doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, stay-at-home moms, service sector workers, plumbers, electricians, etc...? I want to submit to you that every Christian can and should have a kingdom-minded plan for his or her life.

Why are you going to college? To have fun and party? That's not much of a plan. To learn and get a job? That's a little better. Why do you want the career path you've landed on? To make a lot of money so you can have a nice house in a nice neighborhood and nice car and nice vacations with your nice friends and family? That's kind of lame. To get famous and leave your mark on the world? That's more **ambitious**, but kind of vain. Is your end game to contribute something meaningful to culture and thereby love your neighbor? Now we're talking. That's noble. Every kingdom-minded

Christian should *at least* have that positive view of vocation, to want to work well for the well-being of the world. But non-Christians can do that *to some extent*.

But on top of providing a needed service to society for the common good, add a motivation to share the gospel in the workplace, a desire to make money to give to church and others and missions, and a thoughtful intentionality with how your career can make it possible for you to be part of building up a local church in a particular place ... put that all together and you have a kingdom-minded plan for your life. Paul learned tentmaking as a trade because it provided himself and others a place to live, but also because it worked well with bi-vocational church planting when he needed to. I think every Christian who's not in paid ministry leadership should see themselves as co-vocational church planters. You work a secular job and you're a church planter. And so you make decisions on where to live and how to spend your money and time with the overarching goal in mind of how you can be best used in helping your church grow and thrive and be healthy and multiply and start more churches that can reach and disciple more people. That's what's controlling your life at the big picture level and then informing your ground level decisions.

This means your planning is not just like the secular world's planning sessions. For many, their plans are about how they can work at something that they're not totally bored by, but allows them a comfortable standard of living and sets them up well for a good retirement. For others it's more **ambitious**, strategic planning: how can I gain more market share? be the best? get prestige? But for the Christian its: how can I leverage my life – my skills, my opportunities, my assets... – so that there's a healthy church everywhere for everyone. Does that resonate with you? Can you picture what that would look like? If not, I'd love to talk with you more. Let's get a meeting on the calendar.

Planning just enough to get by is pathetic. Planning with the whole goal being how you can serve your self is small-minded. And planning with a need to succeed is super stressful. It depends on you. You have to be smart enough, hard-working enough. Your status depends on it. Your very identity depends on it. And it's all up to you. It breeds **anxiousness**. You have to prove yourself. You have to make it happen. And you don't know, you have no guarantee that you'll make it. And if you do, you have to stay at the top. Worldly **ambition** is **anxiety** laden.

But being thoughtful, intentional, even **ambitious** for the kingdom of God is different. You can dream and scheme and take risks and fail and it doesn't affect your status. How cool is that? Plus, you actually have the guarantee that your labor is not in vain, that somehow through your efforts Christ is inexorably building his Church. This venture cannot fail. It's not ultimately up to you. Wouldn't it be fun to participate in a planning session of a start-up company that you could never be fired from and that you had divine assurance it would last for eternity? That's what you get to do when you make plans that are kingdom-minded. It allows you to **be ambitious without being anxious**.

The second thing we see here is that Paul's plans were realistic. A lot of **ambitious** plans are naïve and sometimes silly. They're not realistic. It's like a business plan that tries to sell ice to Eskimos. Paul says, "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." What's the significance of this detail? It shows us that Paul understood that traveling in this geography and climate was not advisable during the

wintertime. And so he was trying to find a place to wait out the winter months. It's just smart.

Sometimes our planning anxiety is caused by stupidity. We can learn from Paul to make plans that take into account common sense wisdom. How do you get that if you don't have it? Ask God (see James 1:5). Ask other people for advice. And live some life, with humility. God wants us to be **ambitious**, but he's not calling us to be ridiculous. And that reduces the **anxiousness**. Plan realistically.

Third, Paul's plans were relational. Have you ever noticed how planners, organizational thinkers can often be a bit cold, formal, hurried, lacking in social skills? Detail persons can struggle to be people persons. But not Paul. His planning was relational. Notice what he says next – "...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."

Observe that Paul has a genuine, give-and-take relationship with the Corinthians. Paul isn't just providing something for them. He needs them too. He needs a place to stay. But he also says he's hoping that they will give him some assistance for his travel expenses – "that you may help me on my journey." Friendships are always a two-way street. Do you have friends? If they just need you or you just need them, that's not really a friendship. But if you need each other, that's a real relationship.

And you see here that Paul didn't just want something from them. He wanted them. He wanted to spend time with them. Extended time. Un-rushed, quality and quantity time. He wasn't all business. He could hang out. "I do not want to see you... just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you." This tells us that writing letters was not enough. Email and text is not enough. We need to plan to be together with people, in person. People – not just productivity – is what it's all about. The point of planning is people.

And keeping this in view keeps **ambition** from becoming **anxious** – *gotta get stuff done, gotta keep going, can't slow down*. No. You need time with people. Time to just be together. This is the beauty of the church. It's a family, not a factory. We're always intentional with our time, we're not *just* hanging out. But we're spending time together for the sake of helping each other follow Christ in the context of relationships. Who's looking forward to our Summer Retreat when we get away together for a weekend as a church? There's was a Men's Game night last night. Several of us are going camping at the Warren Dunes in June. Thanks for planning that, Brock & Kristi.

Fourth, Paul's plans were dependent on the Lord. This is so clear from this text and so freeing in all of our planning. We've already been seeing hints of it in phrases like "I intend" or "perhaps" or "wherever I go" or "I hope." But it's crystal clear in the phrase Paul adds next – "if the Lord permits." Paul knows that he himself is not sovereign. He doesn't have the ability to make plans and have them come to be, like God does. His planning is contingent on God's plans. He makes plans, but he holds them loosely, because Paul's will is subject to God's will. He recognizes that though he desires to visit the Corinthians and spend a good amount of time with them, God may not permit him, he may providentially prohibit him. And Paul is cool with that.

This is really the main key to being **ambitious without being anxious** – you're not just resigned to but rest in God's overarching plan. How well do you deal with not being in charge? Can you go with the flow and roll with the punches? Do you get angry

if you planned a picnic and it rains? Or do you smile and know God had other plans? Think about some plans you have that don't seem to be panning out. What is God teaching you in this? To have no plans??! No! This is a big part of sanctification – setting good goals, but letting God guide.

The Christian life is full of many deaths, learning to die to our own illusion of self-determination. There's just so much that happens that is not how we had planned our life. And some of it is really hard. My life has not fulfilled every dream that I had for it at one point. But God has only good plans for his children. And I'm learning to trust him. I'm not a Stoic who's detached and trying not to ever get my hopes up. The Lord still wants me to have aims. But in my relationship with him he is always working to refine my aims and teach me to say with my mouth and my heart, "If God wills."

I think, ultimately, that physical death itself is going to be the culmination of this process of learning to trust God. We want to live. We want to go places. We want to plan for the future. But there will come a day, God knows it precisely right now, when you will die. We plan for that with life insurance. We plan for it by making sure we're right with God, through faith in Jesus Christ. But in some ways, we can't plan for it. It may come suddenly and all that was on your calendar that next month doesn't matter anymore. Or it may come slowly and you have to be okay with not being able to do everything you'd like. God is in charge. I'm not.

Verse 8 is intriguing to me. Paul says, "But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost." Pentecost was an OT/Jewish annual feast (the Feast of Weeks) that happened 50 days after the end of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread. But around the third century we start to have some evidence that Pentecost had become a part of the church calendar, a Christian remembrance of the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 on Pentecost. "Whether Christians had started to celebrate it as a festival [in Paul's day] is impossible to determine from this reference; it may simply be Paul's natural way to refer to that time in late spring."³ I think he's still thinking like a Jew who grew up with that way of marking time and not endorsing some kind of liturgical year for the church. It would be like an American in another country writing about how he hoped to be somewhere by Thanksgiving.

Anyway, back to the main point. Verse 9 gives us another profound example of how Paul's planning was dependent on the Lord. When you entrust your life to the Lord who has a larger, sovereign design and you know that he's ultimately guiding your life (though he calls you to plan and often works through your planning), then you can be **ambitious without being anxious** because life becomes almost like a giant game of Jenga. You know that game where you have blocks stacked on top of each other and take turns removing one from a bottom layer and putting on the top without knocking it down? How do you play? By tapping on blocks to see which ones are loose (at least that's how I play). Try this one, and if it's a no go, then try a different one. Or to use the biblical metaphor that Paul uses here – it's like knocking on doors and seeing which ones open.

Paul says, "I will stay in Ephesus... for a wide door for effective work has opened to me." He liked this image of a door. He used it in 2 Corinthians 2:12 and Colossians 4:3 to describe a divinely ordained and orchestrated opportunity. An open door. Paul didn't know exactly which cities would be the most receptive. It was an adventure of try and see. You never know. But when it's working, you know that God's will and yours

have aligned and you take advantage of that. In Ephesus (we learn from Acts 19), Paul found himself in a sweet spot. He got a hook up with a public hall there where he could speak daily. And over the course of two years the whole region had heard the gospel. Something special was happening and when that's the case you ride the wave for as long as you can.

So Paul had plans, he wasn't just going where the wind took him. But he recognized that his plans were subject to God's mysterious will. God is the one who ultimately closes and opens doors. Doesn't that take the pressure off of our planning? We can be **ambitious** and want to be used to see great things happen in the advance of the gospel, but don't have to be **anxious**. We just pray for open doors, push on them, and see what God does. If that one won't budge you go to the next one and trust God

Fifth, Paul's plans anticipated opposition. Paul didn't expect every door to swing open easily and he knew that open doors also involved hard things behind them. He wasn't Pollyanna. He wasn't shocked by hardship, as if God was tricking him. Paul reports – “a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.” Acts 19 also shows some of these difficulties that Paul faced at Ephesus (the “beasts” he fought with there, 15:32). Not everyone loved him. And he eventually had to leave because the city was rioting and wanted to rip him limb from limb.

Isn't that often the case? Things are going smoothly in one sense, but in the same moment there are serious obstacles. It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. Leon Morris writes – “It is part of the conditions under which we serve God that when we have great opportunities of service there are also great difficulties in our way.”⁴ The times when there seem to be great victories in the cause of Christ, Satan (who is our Adversary, but who is also underneath God's permissive will) is counterattacking the hardest. It can feel really rough. The Christian life is never easy. Things may be going great in the church, but your family is under severe attack. Or there may be revival breaking out in your city, but your health is failing.

When we are not unaware of this, when we haven't assumed that it will be a cakewalk, it helps us not get all worked up and frustrated. The Apostle Peter writes – “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1Pe. 4:12). We make plans, but we must not be ignorant of the fact that Satan also has designs, schemes, his own plans (cf. 2Cor. 2:11). We should anticipate opposition, build it into our own plans, and then we won't be so overwhelmed when, what do you know, we encounter adversaries.

Timothy

So that's Paul. Next, we get introduced to Timothy in this text. Timothy was Paul's apprentice. Everybody should have an apprentice. Paul had taken Timothy under his wing and brought him along on many ministry endeavors. And sometimes he sent Timothy as his emissary to places he couldn't go at the time. Paul had sent Timothy to Corinth before, as we saw in 4:17. But here Paul indicates that he is planning to send Timothy to them again. Verse 10 – “When Timothy comes...” I know this is the Timothy section, but like I said, it's still really about Paul. Here we find a sixth lesson – Paul's plans involved other people.

Paul knew he could not do everything himself. So he enlisted help. Which is nice, until you realize that other people are not clones of you. They won't do things

exactly as you would like them to be done. And you can either get **anxious** and nervous and be frustrated, or you can humbly thank God that not everyone is like you and that he uses multiple people and personalities to achieve his purposes. And you can learn to let some things go. Trust God to work through other people. Delegate.

And advocate. Paul wasn't *laissez-faire*, entirely hands-off. He realized he couldn't do everything and employed other people and trusted God. But he still wrote letters to Timothy to encourage him. And here he pleaded on Timothy's behalf with the Corinthians. "When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers." Why did Paul feel the need to say this? Because Timothy struggled with timidity. We surmise that from 2 Timothy 1. And because Timothy was viewed as young and inexperienced. Paul tells the Corinthians here – "[L]et no one despise him." In 1 Timothy 4:12 Paul tells Timothy – "Let no one despise you for your youth."

Paul took a risk with Timothy. He tried his best to train him and help him in his work. But at the end of the day, he let him go and expected him to return successful in some measure because of God's grace. **Ambitious** but not **anxious**.

Apollos

Now there's one more person we meet here. Look at v. 12. It's Apollos. We've actually met him before. Remember him from earlier in this book? Some people in the Corinthian church were saying, "I follow Paul," and some were saying, "I follow Apollos" (1:12). Paul planted the church, but then after he left this gifted preacher named Apollos came in and watered it. And some people thought Apollos was cooler than Paul. And there were factions forming. The Corinthians were really immature.

But Paul was not immature. He was not playing junior-high popularity games. He was not threatened by Apollos. He was not jealous of his gifts or his fame. Remember: he's just kingdom-minded. And so Paul doesn't see Apollos as a rival. From this section we see our seventh principle: Paul's plans were not controlling. He didn't have to get his own way.

Look at how he talks about Apollos – "Now concerning our brother Apollos." In 3:5 he said, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each." They were fellow servants. He says they are fellow brothers in Christ, not competitors.

And Paul wasn't trying to keep Apollos away from Corinth so that they would be more loyal to him. Paul's planning involved using other people's gifts if they would be helpful, even if that person's gifts might overshadow his own. He's not trying to control the situation. Paul says, "I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers."

Apollos for his part did not want to go to Corinth at that time. "I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now." Some have seen this as a reference to God's will, and so Paul is submitting to Providence again. But it's most likely referring to Apollos' will. He had other plans. Perhaps God had opened a wide door for effective work for him somewhere else at the moment and he didn't want to leave. Maybe he was too busy. It's okay to say no when someone asks you to do a good thing if you have good reasons.

And Paul understands that. He concludes – “He will come when he has opportunity.” As one commentator states it – “Paul urged Apollos to visit but did not coerce him, and finally left it up to Apollos whether to visit and when.”⁵ Can you calmly let other people do what they want to do when it’s not what you want them to do? Or do you feel a need to force other people to fit into your plans? Paul didn’t try to keep Apollos away from Corinth for his own ends. And he didn’t try to force Apollos to go. He had plans. He was assertive and active and working for the good of the church in Corinth. But he wasn’t manipulative. He was **ambitious, without being anxious**.

Conclusion

What a concept! What an example. Does your life look like this?

Maybe you’re realizing you’re not a Christian. Your life is all about you. You’re either a selfish underachiever or a self-centered overachiever. You aren’t living for Christ and his kingdom. Our message for you is not – “Start living for God!” No, it’s to repent and turn to Christ for forgiveness, believing that he accomplished his plan for your salvation on the cross when he exchanged your record of unrighteousness with his record of righteousness and bore your judgment. Only once that amazing grace has gripped you can you even begin to live for God. Otherwise whatever good works you do you’ll still be living for yourself and to prove yourself.

For those of you who are believers, this gospel is sweet to you, I hope this passage stirs up holy ambitions in you. Don’t you want this great Savior to be known and praised by more people? And I hope you sit down with some fellow members and make some plans on some napkins on how you can grow personally and how you can help build up the church and help us in our mission to be a multiplying community. Start pursuing people with purpose. Use your time wisely and strategically. Dream. Execute. Don’t just drift through life.

But I hope you do it with deep peace and joy. That you don’t become frantic and frustrated. That you don’t turn people in to projects. That you don’t get heavy-handed. That you don’t get burned out with you encounter obstacles. That you have an abiding sense that God is on his throne and he is ultimately working out his sovereign plan. And it is good.

So make plans that are kingdom-minded, realistic, relational, dependent on the Lord, plans that anticipate opposition, involve other people, and are not controlling, because you know that God is in control. Rest in the fact that everything is unfolding “according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11).

The Lord’s Table

And the place where we see that come together most clearly is at the Cross...
Eph. 3:7-12

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, April 19, 2026. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End Notes:

¹ Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975 [1958]), 240.

² Paul Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 743.

³ Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 332.

⁴ Morris, 241.

⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2018), 332.