

## "The More Excellent Way"

*1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13*

As we return to 1 Corinthians, we pick it up in Ch. 13, perhaps the most well-known portion of the letter, a section on love. While it's popular to use this in weddings (nothing wrong with applying it to marriage) let's not lose sight that Paul is in the middle of correcting the Corinthian church's abuse of spiritual gifts, especially the gift of tongues. The gift of tongues was the Holy Spirit's enabling one to speak a known language that was unknown to them. We see this in Acts when the apostles spoke biblical truths in multiple languages that the listeners identified as their other tongue. It's a spectacular gift that some Corinthians desperately wanted and loved to use not necessarily for the purposes God meant for them to use it for.

This was only one of the ways Paul had pointed out that the Corinthian Christians were not acting very lovingly towards one another. They were divided over their favourite Bible teachers, over who baptized them, over what they could or could eat or not eat but mostly divided over the use (or abuse?) of spiritual gifts. They were enamored with the sign gifts; tongues, prophecy, miracles, knowledge – to the point where they felt they were more mature if they had one of these gifts. Which is the exact opposite of what spiritual maturity and loving like Jesus are.

So after Paul explains the purpose for every spiritual gift (Ch. 12) he ends the chapter reminding them that everyone has different gifts but that they should desire the greater gifts. The greater gifts as we saw last time are the intelligible gifts like prophesy, which people understand. Tongues are unintelligible unless there is an interpreter to explain what was said. How does this build up the church? Faith, hope and love are not gifts themselves. These are the means through which we exercise our gifts; in faith, with full assurance of hope in a loving manner. This, Paul says, is the more excellent way. Paul now shows them first how not to use your spiritual gifts

### **Using Our Gifts in an Unloving Manner Benefits No One** **(12:31-13:3)**

Paul begins with an exaggerated scenario to confront those Corinthians who were enamored with the gift of tongues. In the Greek the "if" clause in this situation means, if I were to have these things but I don't ... So,

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels [and I do not] , but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge [and I cannot], and if I have a faith that can move mountains [and I do not], but have not love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup> If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames [and I have not], but have not love, I gain nothing.*

Paul was saying even if I had the gift of speaking every human language and even the language of angels [which no one knows!], but do it with an unloving attitude, I benefit no one. No one is built up by whatever gifts we have if we do it for selfish reasons. This is the attitude Paul has been confronting all along. Even if we had all spiritual knowledge through the gifts but use them in an unloving manner we benefit no one. And even if we were to make the most spiritual sacrifice; a large gift, be a martyr; we benefit no one and we are not growing spiritually. Instead, we are

## **Annoying (v.1)    Arrogant (v.2)    Empty (v.3)**

A resounding gong or a clanging cymbal on the surface are just annoying noises. But Paul is hitting another sour note when he says 'clanging cymbal' because these were used in pagan rituals of idol worship to attract the attention of the god. Some of these were saved out of these backgrounds. And Paul slams them here by saying using spiritual gifts for yourself or to impress others and not out of love is not worshipping the true God. It's annoying. Just ask the people who you're 'serving' with selfish intentions. They know when we serve from the heart.

In v.2 Paul confronts the Corinthians love for knowledge. They loved new knowledge – and that's great when its knowledge about God from His Word. But when we're just using this knowledge to lord it over others, Paul says you're just being arrogant.

And if you made the greatest financial contribution or made the ultimate sacrifice for Jesus but did it for selfish reasons, then your sacrifice is empty. There's nothing credited to your spiritual bank account.

Paul ended Ch. 12 saying not everyone has the same gifts, and all gifts are to serve the same purpose to build others up. He called them to eagerly desire the greater gifts meaning, gifts that were intelligible like prophecy as opposed to tongues which are unintelligible even to the speaker until someone interprets it. Then he said I will show you a more excellent way referring to using your gifts according to and by the love of God. God loves us so much He sent Jesus to die for us and opened our hearts to Him. Now we are to serve Him out of love for Him and others (greatest commandment) with whatever gift we have. Paul's point here is not that love is a greater gift – it's not a spiritual gift – but it's the way in which we use whatever gift we have out of love for God and to show love to others through our gifts to see them built up in Christ. He now turns to this in v.4,

## **Using our Gifts in a Loving Manner Benefits the People We Serve (13:4-7)**

*<sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

Love (agape) means I will serve you regardless of how you respond to me. Which is how God and Jesus love us. 'For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life'.

Paul now gives 15 verbs of what love really looks like. Love is an action more than an emotion. Paul uses 15 verbs in 3 verses even though our translators list many as adjectives. We have to get this clear:

### ***Love acts graciously (vv.4-5a)***

He tells us what love looks like as well as what love doesn't look like. Literally we should read '*Love acts graciously, love treats people kindly, love does not envy what it doesn't have, love does not boast about what it does have. Love does not act rudely or seeks to be loved.*

To love like Jesus is seen in being patient and kind because as you grow spiritually you realize how flawed and sinful we all are. Patience means long-suffering. That means we listen first before we

speak. We plan to act as opposed to react. We don't rush to defend ourselves. Sadly we are often less patient and kind to those closest to us.

Love is kind because it treats others like God; with compassion and respect. As Christian spouses and parents, we should model this most in our homes. We all struggle with sin and kids must learn that their misbehaviour is a result of their sin nature. If we want them to show God's kindness and compassion to us, we should do the same to them. Love them like Jesus because all that we have in Christ is grace and we're shown so much grace by God; we need to show it ourselves to show that the Spirit is producing His fruit in us.

### ***Love doesn't react harshly (vv.5b-6)***

Love is not easily angered and holds no record of wrongs. We talked about this last week in Eph. 4 where we are to forgive as God forgives us. A few of you talked to me afterward last week about that. One thing I should have said last week was this is a process. Even when you say you've forgiven someone the enemy will bring it up again and again. And each time you have to say, 'No, I have forgiven them and I'm not bringing it up again. Corrie Ten Boom once said that while God buries our sins in the deepest seas, now and then we go fishing. We bring them up ourselves sometimes. But every time we say, no. Forgiveness is to love.

*"Love does not delight in evil"*. How do we respond when someone we struggle to get along with has something bad happen to them? Do we inwardly rejoice while outwardly looking like we're sad for them? Or do we rejoice when something good happens to someone other than ourselves? This is reality. Paul's speaking truth here.

In v.7 Paul says Jesus' love bears, believes, endures and hopes in "all things". Four times "all things" is mentioned. So, if you were thinking for a moment in your mind 'Yeah but you don't know what I have to put up with' at home, at work, etc., v.7 doesn't give us an excuse does it. "All things".

### ***Love commits (v.7)***

We're in there for the long haul. We're to be committed the way God is committed to us. Yes, relationships are rocky at times, but God says hang in there. God never leaves us nor forsakes us. We need to have that kind of commitment to spouses, families and church families. When people church hop usually their preferences aren't met. That's what Corinthians is all about; a church divided over preferences. No church is perfect. Come to serve not to receive. When we do the former we get the latter. Avoid the drive-thru mentality. I came; I got what I wanted but I forgot to notice the people who served me.

Our spiritual gifts are first of all, gifts. We 'pursue' gifts in the sense that we pray and serve in various capacities to see how we are gifted. God will confirm it and so will His people. But we do so not for the purpose of being noticed or applauded (the Corinthians were too easily impressed) but for the purpose of serving others so they are built up spiritually.

Paul transitions back to the spiritual gifts themselves in vv.8-13 and basically says, all gifts are wonderful but they are temporary. one day when the perfect comes there will be no need for these gifts. But love, hope and faith are always with us. So

## **Using our Gifts Spiritually Prepares Us for Eternity** **(13:8-13)**

What do I mean by using our gifts Spiritually? By the direction and power of the Spirit Himself. In love. That's how the Spirit works. This was the problem here. Many Corinthians wanted and were using their gifts to impress others. Had very little Spirit-leading to it. Let's make sure the Spirit is guiding us as we use gifts in love.

These verses have gotten a lot of attention over the years and have been the cause of much confusion. Some claim these verses state that certain gifts mentioned here [prophecy, tongues and knowledge] have ceased already since they are foundational gifts. And that 'perfect' refers to the completion of the New Testament. While I would agree that these gifts are foundational – and their lack of being mentioned in most New Testament letters is a strong argument – that doesn't mean that God can't use these gifts anymore where people have never heard the gospel and churches have yet to exist.

If 'perfect' refers to the New Testament then according to Paul, we see more clearly than Paul did. If 'perfect' means the end of this world as we know it, when the new heavens and new earth come down and sin no longer exists, then clearly there's no need for spiritual gifts of any kind. For then we will know fully. We will be sinless and full of all spiritual knowledge enjoying God and Jesus' presence. Paul simply says these gifts will cease at some point, seemingly when the perfect has come. We'll talk more about the purpose of tongues, prophecy and knowledge when we get to Ch. 14. Part of our misunderstanding here I believe comes from a lack of understanding of what these gifts are. When Paul wrote this, these gifts were still existent, so let's approach the text from that perspective. As well, focusing on when the gifts cease and what the perfect is causes us to lose focus on using our gifts with love – which is the point Paul is making.

When we exercise our gifts serving one another in love,

### ***We give evidence that Jesus actually came (vv.8-11)***

How so? The only reason the Spirit gave us our gifts is because He dwells in us. And the reason He dwells in us is because Jesus went back to His Father and promised He would send His Spirit. Which is proof that Jesus came and was real and died and rose again. If Jesus isn't who He said He was and didn't do what He did then we have no hope. Our faith is a farce and loving like Jesus is a waste of time. But if Jesus is the real deal, when we obey His Word and love others selflessly through the power of the Holy Spirit the world sees this and wants to know how we can do this since they can't and don't understand why we would act in love. Regardless of what gift we have, when we serve others with the love of Jesus we continue to give witness to Jesus' life, death and resurrection until He comes.

Since the perfect hasn't come yet (Jesus) people can only see Jesus' life lived through the lives of His followers. As imperfect as we are. But our limitations are God's power and our willingness to love like Him and surrender our 'rights', allowing the Spirit to work through His gifts in us, people will see for now the difference Jesus can make. And Lord willing place their faith in Him before He returns.

In the meantime, when we selflessly serve one another as Jesus commanded us to,

### ***We get a taste of eternity now (vv.12-13)***

Are we there yet? Not yet. Just as a polished brass vase doesn't give you a clear image of oneself (the mirror in Paul's day), it does give you a reflection of something real Faith, hope and love remain forever. When we exercise faith, when we trust in the hope-filled promises of God and when we love selflessly as Jesus commanded us to, we remind ourselves that we are getting a taste of

what eternity will be like. Forgiving others, enduring difficulties for maturing, using our gifts to help each other become more like Christ and experiencing the joy of obedience and fellowship are all samples of what we'll experience when things are perfect.

But love is even better than hope and faith because one day our faith will be perfect and we'll be in God's presence and all that we hoped for will have arrived. But we will still love and enjoy perfect love.

The most excellent way is to serve others from a deep-rooted understanding of God's love for us, that we want to share that love with each other and the lost. Pray for God's Spirit to help you to love better this week. Love means selflessly serving others without looking for being loved back or impressing others. And maybe, when we do that to the unsaved they may wonder why we did this and we can share that God loves them too.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please  
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