

# "Be Zealous to Edify"

*1 Corinthians 14:1-12*

As we've studied Corinthians we have seen that the Christians there were divided over preferences, or personal likes and dislikes. They had their favourite Bible teachers. They divided over what they could or could not eat. They were divided over women's head coverings and they were divided over spiritual gifts, in particular the gift of tongues, which is the miraculous gifting of the Spirit to speak a language that you have never learned or known.

In Ch. 12 Paul first explained that the purpose for every spiritual gift is to benefit others, "for the common good" (12:7). All gifts are necessary like every part of the body is necessary even though many important body parts are unseen and have important behind the scenes functions. When he ended chapter 12 he encouraged them to desire the greater gifts, the greater gifts being the ones people understand and that more can benefit from. Which now, he continues this emphasis encouraging people to pursue gifts like prophesy which people understand over Tongues which are unintelligible unless there is an interpreter to explain what was said. Whatever gift you use, it is a gift from God's Spirit for the purpose of building up the body of Christ with the attitude of sacrificial love (Ch. 13). Use your gifts to serve others and not promote yourself.

It's important to note here as Paul compares the benefits of prophesying over tongues speaking that he is not depreciating tongues (or sign gifts) but encouraging the appreciation of prophesying. One is more exciting than the other and that's his main point in this whole chapter. Don't be zealous to have a 'cool' gift to enjoy for yourself, rather be zealous to have gifts that build up more people than yourself.

As I said two weeks ago when we were discussing whether these gifts have ceased today or not (13:8-12), I believe 'perfect' refers to our eternal perfection not the completion of the New Testament revelation. Paul taught these things when these gifts were active. I think the best way to approach the text is to study and teach it in that context.

He ended Ch. 12 with

<sup>31</sup> *But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.* Ch. 13 with

Then ended

<sup>13</sup> *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. 14 Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy*

Paul wants every believer to know they have spiritual gifts. A Spirit empowered gift that in obedience to God we are to use by His Spirit to communicate truths or serve people in ways that we could not do on our own. But we don't know what they are initially. We discover them as we serve God, sensing His using us to make a difference in people's lives. These gifts are also affirmed by other believers who encourage us to keep serving or speaking by God's power. I divide the gifts into these two general areas because the apostle Peter divides the gifts like this in 1 Pet. 4:10-11,

<sup>10</sup> *Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. <sup>11</sup> If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he*

should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

With the Corinthians, Paul spoke here about two different speaking gifts; prophesying and tongues. He lists the benefits of each noting that prophesying has broader benefits than tongues. But first he generally commands us to be zealous to use the Spirit's gifts in love to serve others. That's a good place to start:

## **How Can I Sacrificially Serve Others with the Spirit's Gifts to Me? (14:1a)**

In 2 Cor. 5:10 Paul reminds us that each believer will appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of the things done in the body [Christ's body] whether good or bad. We have the Spirit who gifts us to serve others but are we using our gifts? Are we involved in serving the body of Christ here? Some of you may be looking forward to learning about prophesy and tongues but you're not serving in any way. Jesus isn't going to ask us to give an account of how we understand what tongues or prophesy is, He's going to ask us what we 'did'. There's no test for how much Bible knowledge we have, but we will be held accountable for how much knowledge we obtain. James warns us in James 3:1

*1 Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.*

Why? Because we have acquired more biblical knowledge. Implication: the more biblical knowledge we have, the more accountable to God we will be for it. The Christian life is not about how much we know but how willing we are to serve others in love by the Spirit's power and leading.

*"Follow the way of love" [just explained in Ch. 13, love meaning serving others with no expectation of reciprocation] and earnestly desire spiritual gifts [we get zealous from 'eagerly desire'] especially the gift of prophecy." Why?*

*<sup>2</sup> For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. <sup>3</sup> But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. <sup>4</sup> He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. <sup>5</sup> I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.*

Nothing wrong with tongues – it's a spiritual gift too. However, only the speaker and the interpreter are edified. Paul says *"He who prophesies edifies the church ... so that the church may be edified.* So here's another question we need to ask ourselves:

## **How Can I Build Up the Most People with the Spirit's Gifts to Me? (14:1b-5)**

Paul compares tongues and prophesy from the perspective of who benefits more from these gifts. He did tell us to be zealous for gifts – which means we have a part to play in the – but personal zeal for a more exciting gift was a problem then and a problem today. Many people are enamoured by the gift of tongues, because it's exciting. A lot of people misunderstand tongues as being primarily

the gift to speak a human language that you don't know for the purpose of evangelism (I'm jumping ahead a bit here. We'll deal more with the purpose of tongues in the next two weeks).

Paul's point was, be zealous to have this gift so you can impress people, sound more spiritual than others or use it as proof that you have the Holy Spirit. Tongues is not used this way in the bible at all. Notice the differences here between tongues and prophesy.

*<sup>2</sup> For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God.*

*<sup>4</sup> He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself,*

Paul's comparison here is not to undermine tongues but to point out it's limitations, especially if its not exercised for its primary use of evangelism (14:22). Do you want to impact others for Christ with your gifts? Then don't just

### ***Build up yourself (vv.2a, 4a)***

When people speak in tongues only God knows what they are saying if there's no interpreter. Some people humbly claim they speak in tongues in prayer. There's an experience of communion with God but they don't know what they are saying unless they also are given an interpretation. And the emphasis in Ch. 14 seems to weigh heavily that the tongue speaker should have an interpreter (v.5).

Paul's focus again is seek the gifts that edify the church family, focusing not on serving yourself but making ministry

### ***About others (vv.4b-5)***

*but he who prophesies edifies the church. <sup>5</sup> I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.*

The word 'edify' is a construction term that literally means house-building. How does one build a house? You start with a solid foundation. Paul tells us in Ephesians what that solid foundation is:

*<sup>2:19</sup> Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

This is the litmus test of every ministry and gift; are we building on the solid foundation laid by Jesus' death, burial and resurrection and that faith alone in Hi saves you and living by faith grows you, together with everyone. Remember, Paul said back in Ch. 12 the Spirit gives us all gifts for the common good, that we would be built up together. If our ministry does not have Scriptural support, we are not building on Jesus' foundation but our own. And that won't last. Earlier in Ch. 3 Paul says that's how all our ministry will be examined;

*<sup>3:8</sup> The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. <sup>9</sup> For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.*

*<sup>10</sup> By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already*

*laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, <sup>13</sup> his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. <sup>14</sup> If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. <sup>15</sup> If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*

This is why Paul commends believers to be zealous about having gifts that built up the church not just you. And he focuses on prophecy. We'll talk about what it means in a minute, but why would he tell us to be zealous for gifts in the first place? Aren't they gifts and we have no choice in what we have? Yes but we don't know what gifts we have until we start serving God. When we start serving God whether it be in speaking or serving., God makes it know to us in joy in serving, by people responding to these gifts and by more mature believers affirming the Spirit's role in our lives. It is our responsibility to mature in Christ and part of that maturing is using our gifts more in God-glorifying and church edifying ways. So then what is the gift of prophecy? I think it's one of the more obtainable gifts than we realize. He tells us what the gift of prophecy does:

*<sup>3</sup> But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.*

The gift of prophecy results in people being

### ***Strengthened, Encouraged and Comforted (v.3)***

How? Through the Word of God. The gift of prophecy is to communicate God's Word that results in people being strengthened, encouraged and comforted. The prophets give us great examples of this which we'll see momentarily. But let's make sure that it is the communication of God's word to the needs of believers that results in these 3 things. It is not new revelation from God because the canon of Scripture is closed. It is not a formal, Spirit-filled moment where one all of a sudden declares 'Thus says the Lord'. Those days are past. But since God's Word is living and breathing and sharper than any double-edge sword it always speaks to the needs of His people. And some believers are gifted to assess people's circumstances and speak encouraging, comforting and sometimes confronting truths from the Word that show people what God's perspective is. This is what he means by prophesying, not declaring new truths. Let's look at a few examples:

2 Chron. 15:1-8 The Spirit of God comes upon a man named Azariah who went to Israel's king Asa. He reminded him of God's past work in Israel's life, how God was with Asa so Asa should continually seek God, keep obeying God and God would bless him. So in v.8 we read,

*<sup>8</sup> When Asa heard these words and the prophecy of Azariah son of Oded the prophet, he took courage. He removed the detestable idols from the whole land of Judah and Benjamin and from the towns he had captured in the hills of Ephraim. He repaired the altar of the Lord that was in front of the portico of the Lord's temple.*

He then leads the people into a covenant renewal, many sought God eagerly and God gave them rest on every side (v.15). Asa was following God but needed encouragement to remove idols and challenge the people to walk with God too. No new revelation, just a reminder of what God did in the past and promised to other prophets. The more we know God's Word and the more sensitive we are to people around us the more the Spirit will enable us to see others' discouragement and what Scripture will encourage them. If Paul desired for everyone to prophesy, then it should be something we think more on and pray more about.

Paul used future prophecy as an encouragement to the believers in Thessalonica. In 1 Thes. 4:13-18 he pointed out that deceased believers will not miss out when Jesus returns in the clouds to

rapture His church. He ended v.18 with 'encourage one another with these words.' Then he continues talking about the dreadful future Day of the Lord's wrath that comes on the earth. Believers know this will happen. The world will get worse but we are spared from God's wrath. Again he ends that section with an encouraging word,

*<sup>11</sup> Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

This is important to know because the world is not getting better. It may experience swings of good and bad but ultimately things will get worse, culminating in a 7-year Day of the Lord wrath upon the world that rejects God and Jesus. If you're a believer and you're worried about the circumstances of the world, you need to be reassured that the Bible tells us it will get worse before Jesus comes. And then it gets really good.

And Jesus Himself modeled this in John 14 when He told His disciples He had to leave. And they are discouraged and worried. But Jesus comforts them in John 14:1-3 that if He goes away He will come back and while He's gone He will prepare a place for us and then return for us and take us there. *Do not let your heart be troubled.*

This is the gift that many people could have as they learn Scripture, walk in obedience to the Lord, are sensitive to the needs of those around them and speak God's words of encouragement over people. This is what Paul was getting at. Tongues encourages you but coming alongside hurting people with the assurances of God's Word serves many others. That's why Paul was so big on this and encouraged people to be zealous to edify others not just yourself.

He illustrates this with two examples. Musical instruments and trumpet blasts. When someone plays a tune on an instrument we recognize it and appreciate it. But if someone just hits it randomly there's no cohesiveness; it serves no purpose.

Different trumpet calls were used to call people to gather, to charge in battle, to retreat from battle. You don't play reveille when you go to bed. You don't just blow on a trumpet to make a sound and expect people to understand what's played. So it is with tongues Paul says. It only benefits people when it's intelligible. So here's our third question in applying this passage,

## **How Can I Speak Truth Clearly with the Spirit's Gifts to Me?** **(14:7-12)**

After he gives the illustrations he explains,

*<sup>9</sup> So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. <sup>10</sup> Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. <sup>11</sup> If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me. <sup>12</sup> So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.*

It's clear here that Paul defines tongues as languages. In v.11 he uses the word for 'foreigner' or some translations use the literal Barbarian. A barbarian in Paul's day was a non-Greek, one who was from somewhere else.

We're going to be in Ch. 14 for two more Sundays so we'll touch on a lot of this again. But Paul's main point here is it's great to want and find your spiritual gift. We all have at least one and I believe gifts can change over time as we mature and follow the Lord. There's also a sense of

responsibility for growing in our gift and using it for the edification of others, to build up the church not ourselves. Paul seemed to think having the gift of understanding God's Word to take it and speak to encourage people one on one or in a small group or like this is pretty special. And while you may not think that's very exciting, I think it's very exciting to see people make life-changing decisions based on the Word of God. And when we see the changes we make as we obey the Word we are all built up in our faith.

\* \* \* \* \*

If you have any questions or comments about this message please  
contact us at [olivet@rideau.net](mailto:olivet@rideau.net)