



FIRST CORINTHIANS

1 CORINTHIANS 12:1–13:13

 LIVING WAY
BIBLE STUDY

PERSONAL APPLICATION – 1 CORINTHIANS 14:1–40

77

• • •

“Love will continue into eternity because as long as we dwell with the Lord, we will bask in His commitment to us. We will enjoy His favor and guidance and protection. We will live in His heaven.”

• • •

The next several chapters of Paul's letter deal with the use of spiritual gifts. The manner in which Paul approaches this topic suggests he is answering another question raised by the Corinthians themselves. Paul shows that spiritual gifts are those abilities given by God through His Spirit which work for the purpose of building up His Church. Spiritual gifts are given by God to help His people fulfill their mission of upholding and extending God's kingdom.

To help the Corinthians understand spiritual gifts, Paul reminds them that just as different influences once led them to worship false gods, now the influence of God's Spirit has led them to trust in Jesus Christ. When Paul states that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Spirit,” he isn't claiming that an unbeliever is incapable of mouthing the words “Jesus is Lord,” but that no one can make a confession of trust and love in the Lord without the Spirit working inside. By the same token, anyone who denies the Lord indicates an absence of God's Spirit. This understanding of the Spirit's role in the creation and preservation of faith is a familiar one to the New Testament. For example, when Peter confesses his understanding that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, Jesus makes clear “this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven” (Matthew 16:17). When the disciples want to know the meaning of one of Jesus' parables, Jesus says to them, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them” (Matthew 13:11). Repeatedly, we are told that our understanding and love of Jesus can only be possible by the working of the Spirit. We do not choose to believe. Faith is solely the work of God in us.



So, having explained the broad purpose of the Spirit in bringing people to the Lord, Paul describes other gifts given by the Spirit. These gifts are many and varied, but they are given by the same Lord. And at least one gift is given to each believer so that all of God's people may be edified. No one can claim that he or she is without a gift. Perhaps the gift has never been explored, but there always exists at least one such gift in each Christian.

Paul continues by listing some of these spiritual gifts. For example, the Spirit gives the "message of wisdom" and the "message of knowledge." Knowledge and wisdom, of course, are not the same things. Knowledge, in the spiritual sense, involves an understanding of the ways and will of God. There are those who have a thorough understanding of God's plan of salvation in Jesus, but they may not have the wisdom to apply this knowledge to Christian living. In a broader sense, there are knowledgeable individuals within each congregation who are endowed with an incredible grasp of information and data. Wisdom, on the other hand, involves a quality of judgment and discernment, and ability to use information for the purpose of making a sensible and God pleasing decision.

Within the congregation, both gifts are important. When planning a particular project, there will be those who can impart all kinds of information concerning the various options possible, and with that information, there are others who have the wisdom to make sound practical judgments about which options to choose.

Others within God's Church may be given the gift of faith, the ability to struggle through trials and crises with no doubt of the Lord's presence

and providence. Such people are invaluable to a congregation when it must endure difficult times involved in budgetary problems, or divisions, or spiritual crises. Such problems may threaten to discourage everyone else, but those with the gift of faith are able to endure with hope.

Still others are given more spectacular gifts such as miraculous powers, which is literally translated "deeds of power." They are given the ability to demonstrate the Lord's power and providence in the congregation by achieving "miracles" within the church. In Paul's day, these may have involved God's supernatural intervention in the lives of His people. Today, people may demonstrate this gift when they achieve the unbelievable among God's people, perhaps by solving an intractable dispute or by realizing a seemingly impossible goal for the church.

There are others given the gift of prophecy. In Scripture, prophecy does not always mean predicting the future. A prophet is one who speaks the words of God. Sometimes in Scripture, prophecy involves looking forward to the future, for example, when the prophet Agabus predicted Paul would be arrested if he were to go to Jerusalem (Acts 21:10–11). The prophet Isaiah was proficient at foreseeing the coming of the Messiah and the Babylonian Exile. But really, the ability to predict the future was only secondarily related to the primary purpose of relating God's Word to the people. So, whenever an individual expresses God's Word to others, he or she is acting as a prophet. Pastors do this all the time when they preach. Others may demonstrate the gift of prophecy when they teach.

● ● ● ● ●

*It is the same Spirit which gives this rich assortment of gifts,
but the Spirit gives them as He pleases for a single, focused
reason: to uplift and promote God's kingdom on earth.*

● ● ● ● ●

Still others are given the gift of discernment, “distinguishing between the spirits.” The gift of discernment is essential for Christians to determine which words are true and from God, and which are false. In a world where there are many “false prophets” promoting their opinions of God’s identity and will, it is particularly important for every congregation to contain individuals who possess this gift. And when such a gift is recognized, it is valuable for the members of the congregation to listen to his or her counsel.

A further gift involves speaking in different tongues or languages, and the ability to interpret those languages. There is much debate about the validity of this gift in the modern church. Paul discusses the use of this gift more thoroughly in Chapter 14, so we’ll consider speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues in the next lesson.

Suffice it to say that whatever gifts are evident within the congregation, they are to be used for the single purpose of building up God’s people. Spiritual gifts, then, are an example of unity which comes from diversity. The gifts may vary greatly, but the purpose for using them remains the same. It is the same Spirit which gives this rich assortment of gifts, but the Spirit gives them as He pleases for a single, focused reason: to uplift and promote God’s kingdom on earth. Paul makes clear

that the Spirit determines which gifts each believer should possess.

To illustrate the remarkable way in which these various gifts can bring unity to the congregation, Paul uses the example of the human body. The human body works with a single purpose, and yet the body is made up of an incredible collection of parts. Each part performs a different function, and yet each function is performed for the good of the whole. If the whole body were a foot, we could only walk. If the whole body were an eye, we could only see. If the whole body were an ear, we would only hear. If we were only able to perform one function, of course, we would soon die. And if each part decided to go its separate way, refusing to cooperate with the other parts, the body would die in an anarchy of different actions. It is this amazing assortment of functions working for a single purpose which allows the body to survive.

No matter how richly a congregation has been blessed with spiritual gifts, these gifts are useless if they are not coordinated for a single purpose. If everyone wants to be a choir director and nobody wants to be part of the choir, there will be no choir. If everyone wants to be the church’s secretary and no one wants to teach Sunday school, the church will be hard pressed. If everyone insists on being a trustee and fixing the property, there will be no one to care for the

spiritual concerns of the congregation. By the same token, if the organist and the pastor are at war with one another, refusing to cooperate with each other's goals, the worship service will become a circus. If a Sunday school teacher decides he or she would rather teach the Book of Mormon than the Bible, the whole mission of the church will come to a roaring halt.

Each individual within every congregation needs the gifts and support of all the others. If one part fails to function, the whole body suffers. Using this illustration, we begin to understand the importance of each person's activity within the church. Whenever a member neglects the use of his gift, refuses to participate in the cause of the whole, everyone suffers. When church members "drop out," or become delinquent, the effectiveness of the congregation in service to the Lord is hampered.

One of my biggest frustrations in ministry involves those individuals who become inactive. What a waste! It is as if the congregation's left thumb suddenly grows paralyzed, or an eye suddenly goes blind. I often question whether those who drift away from the church understand their real importance. I think if each individual within the congregation was fully aware how important he or she is to the pastor and congregation, that person would never find an excuse to become inactive. But alas, the devil often convinces such a person that he or she is really unimportant and insignificant. Let me emphasize, though, that those feelings are not from God. They are of the devil for the purpose of hindering God's Church.

Because some spiritual goals may seem more attractive or spectacular than others, it is important that the church honor those who have the most "ordinary" gifts. Prophecy,

for example, may seem more important than the gift of administration. But just as we give more honor to those parts of our body which are least attractive (for example, even though my stomach is growing increasingly large and unattractive as I grow older, I still give it the honor of food!), so Christians should richly honor those among them who exercise the more ordinary gifts. If the more spectacularly gifted demonstrate their love and humility to the Lord by honoring those more ordinarily gifted, many divisions within the church will be avoided.

On the other hand, Paul encourages us to pray for the greater gifts. In the last part of chapter 12, he seems to rank the importance of spiritual gifts. The greatest gift is that of apostleship. Some people define this gift as applying to those who are compelled to go to the four corners of the world preaching the Gospel. If we define the gift that broadly, then it can be said that the gift of apostleship still remains. If we define the gift as applying only to those Jesus chose during His ministry on earth (as do most scholars), then by definition this gift can no longer exist.

Prophecy is listed as the next important gift, followed by teaching. Then follows the gift of miracles, the gift of healing, and the gift of helping (the ability and desire to support others in need. How every congregation needs such people!). The gift of administration is listed as next in importance. You will notice the last gift listed is the gift of tongues, indicating that as far as spiritual gifts are concerned, there are many gifts more important.

As Paul continues into chapter thirteen, he indicates that there is one quality which supersedes all spiritual gifts. That quality is Christian love. In our modern world, we have

redefined love as the heady feeling of “being in love,” or we view it as a sexual act. If you have ever been curious about the real, true, God-given definition of love, here it is. And the description of love given by Paul is much more than a feeling. It is a commitment.

No matter what spiritual gift we may enjoy, it will be worth nothing if it is not framed in Christian love. A person might be the greatest prophet ever born, but if he or she is unable to demonstrate Christian love, the work of that prophet will come to nothing. If an individual has the kind of faith that seems so powerful it could move mountains, but there is no love attached, that faith will do nothing to build God’s Church. And if an individual can speak in tongues more fluently and “supernaturally” than anyone on earth and love does not restrain that gift, it will only divide and annoy. And if a person has the most incredible gift of generosity but doesn’t accompany it with a love for those to whom he gives, then he is wasting his time.

It is often Christian love that transforms an ability, or talent, or propensity into a spiritual gift. After all, look what Christian love involves: patience, kindness, no envy, no boasting, and humility. It is polite and not focused on oneself. Love rarely grows angry (although you’ll notice Paul doesn’t say love is never angry. There are times when “tough love” is essential, after all). True Christian love forgets the hurts and doesn’t keep a mental diary of everything that a person has done to offend in the past. Love truly rejoices at those things which are good and true, and is repelled by evil. True love is interested in protecting and trusting and persevering with the object of that love.

How different Paul’s definition of love from that espoused by our literature and media. Finally, you see, Christian love has little to do

with feelings and hormones. It has everything to do with committing one’s hopes, guidance, and protection to another. This is the kind of love shown by Jesus when He cared more for us than He did for Himself, giving His life for our salvation. Jesus didn’t die for us because He was “in love” with us. He did it because He was committed in love towards us. God has saved us from sin because He is committed to His creation. And even though we always disappoint and hurt Him, His commitment of love lasts for eternity.

How differently we can approach the concept of love in “marriage” if we view it as a commitment to care and nurture one another rather than a promise to stay attached as long as the good feelings continue. When couples endure the ups and downs of marriage, they would remember that “love always perseveres” because love is a commitment to the relationship.

In the end, all spiritual gifts will disappear. When we reach our heavenly home, there will be no need of prophecy because we will know the Lord face-to-face. There will be no need to demonstrate the miracle of tongue-speaking because there will no longer be unbelievers to convince or judge. Knowledge will be unimportant because we will already be perfectly “in the know.” All spiritual gifts are to help us grow closer to the Lord, but when we dwell with Him in perfection, all such gifts will be unnecessary. Love will continue into eternity because as long as we dwell with the Lord, we will bask in His commitment to us. We will enjoy His favor and guidance and protection. We will live in His heaven.

So, you see, faith and hope are essential as we look to our Lord for salvation. But finally it will only be love which outlasts everything else. It will only be love because, after all, God is love.

PERSONAL APPLICATION*1 CORINTHIANS 14:1-40*

Blessed Lord, we thank You for the words of advice Paul gave the Corinthians because we, too, learn something about Your will through them. Help us to value those who prophesy in Your name. We pray You would grant us the greater gifts of the Spirit so that through us You might build up the Church. Give us the opportunity to worship You in peace and order. In Jesus' name. Amen.

1. Describe the events of Pentecost. (Acts 2:1-13)

What is it about the miracle of "tongues" at Pentecost which seems to differ from the gift of "tongues" described by Paul? (14:2, 6, 9, 19; Acts 2:7-12)

2. After having read 1 Corinthians 14, how would you compare the value of speaking in tongues with the value of prophecy?

What is the problem with the gift of speaking in tongues? (14:1-9)

How does this compare with the warning Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 13:1?

3. a. Describe the events which surrounded the first scriptural example of "speaking in tongues." (Genesis 11:1-9)

Was this miracle a blessing or an act of judgment?

- b. When the Lord first called Isaiah, what was his mission? (Isaiah 6:1-10)

What would happen to the Lord's message when given to Israel? (Isaiah 6:9)

Would this be a blessing or an act of judgment? (Isaiah 6:11-13)

- c. Did the disciples understand Jesus' parables at first? (Luke 8:4-9)

When the disciples asked Jesus why He spoke in parables, what was Jesus' answer? (Matthew 13:10-15; Mark 4:1-12)

Were those people who did not understand Jesus' parables blessed or judged? (Matthew 13:14-15)

d. What was the reaction of some towards the disciples speaking in tongues at Pentecost? (Acts 2:13)

Do you think they were blessed by the miracle of Pentecost or judged?

So then, what could be the result of unbelievers hearing Christians speak in tongues? (14:16-17, 21-23)

e. What may be the effect of prophecy on unbelievers? (14:24-25)

4. How do the following verses suggest that God desires order instead of chaos? (Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 33:6-9; Mark 8:23-27; 2 Corinthians 4:6)

5. What setting is Paul describing in verses 26-33?

So, in what context is Paul asking women to remain silent? (14:34-35)

And what setting is Paul describing in 1 Timothy 2:1-10?

So again, in what context is Paul asking women to remain silent and show submission? (1 Timothy 2:11-12)

What are the reasons Paul gives for this command? (1 Timothy 2:13-14)

Are women altogether forbidden to pray or prophesy or teach? (Acts 18:24-26; 1 Corinthians 11:5)

What does this suggest to you about the role of women within the church?

Do you think Paul's command is something we can dismiss as a product of his culture? (14:36-38)

6. If someone in your congregation claims to have the gift of "tongues," what advice would you give him or her about using the gift?