



The More Excellent Way

1 Corinthians 12:31-14:1

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For the past two Sundays, we've been looking at 1 Corinthians 12 and what St. Paul has to say there about the gifts of the Spirit. The Corinthians had been abusing their Spirit-given gifts and splitting up into factions over their ideas on which gifts were more important than others and over how to use (or not use) those gifts. They forgot that the Spirit's gifts are gifts of *grace* – not gifts we earn and not gifts that are distributed based on our merit. And so Paul's been offering them correction. Reminding them Christ has baptised each and every one of us by his Spirit into his body and that the Spirit gifts every one of us for service and ministry – but gifts us all *differently* so that the body will be complete. The Spirit's goal is first to make us one and then to equip us to do the work that needs to be done where he's put us. That's why he tells us to "earnestly desire the higher gifts." He doesn't mean that somehow we can pester or persuade the sovereign giver of gifts to give each of us more gifts, but that as the body – the Church – we ought to make ministry and the collective use of our gifts a priority that we might build and grow the Kingdom of God – and as the Kingdom grows, we then trust that God will empower his body with more gifts for greater ministry and service.

That's the point of spiritual gifts, but Paul ends Chapter 12 saying:

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

He's saying that spiritual gifts are great – even that they're essential to our wellbeing as the body of Christ – but we need to keep them in perspective. The modern Church needs to hear this as much as the Corinthians did. If the Church divides over issues surrounding spiritual gifts, we've missed the bigger picture and we've missed what Paul calls here the "more excellent way." Look at 13:1.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

He reminds those who thought they were superior because they had the gifts of tongues that it doesn't matter what tongue, what language, you speak in or how glorified your speech is, if your speech isn't spoken in love. The gift of tongues without love is just worthless cacophony.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:2)

Just like tongues, prophecy and knowledge and faith amount to nothing without love. You can have a direct pipeline to the mind of God, you can have the wisdom and knowledge of an entire seminary library stored up in your brain, and you can have faith that picks up mountains and casts them into the sea, but if you don't have love it's all for nothing.

If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Even giving away your worldly possessions and even giving up your life count for nothing if they aren't given up for the sake of love. Paul reminds us: God's supreme purpose for us on earth is *not* and never has been the use of spiritual gifts. His supreme purpose for us is to learn love.

And here's where St. Paul draws a distinction. The Spirit gives us gifts, but he first gives us something more important and that's love. Without love, the Spirit's gifts are worthless. Without love, we each become spiritual zeros. In heavenly math, even the largest number minus one equals zero, if the one thing we're subtracting is love. If we don't have love, we've somehow missed the very Gospel itself.

What is love? Love is what Jesus expresses in John 3:16.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Love is what St. Paul describes when he writes in Romans 5:8-10

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

"While we were still sinners..." What does that mean? Remember Jesus told the Pharisees he came not to heal those who are well, but those who are sick. Brothers and sisters, we were *all* sick. Some of you still may be sick. Each and every one of us revolted against our Creator, committing cosmic treason. We turned our backs on God and devoted our lives to everything he stands against. We willingly submitted ourselves to the bondage and corruption of sin and death when he created us for life with him.

And, friends, remember, God is holy – *perfectly* holy. We can't even fully conceive of that. He is the embodiment of perfect goodness and perfect righteousness. He is *light* and in him is *no* darkness at all. Compared to his perfect holiness, even the least sinful of us are like filth, wrapped in scum and putrefaction. In fact, if you went through your life and picked out the one sin that was the smallest and least offensive that sin would still be vile when compared to God's holiness. He is light. In him is no darkness at all – not even in his presence, which is why our sins remove us from his sight. Paul tells us that the wages of sin is death – not just for a life of sin, but for even that one smallest and least offensive sin.

When we sin, not matter how small, we reject God. We reject his lordship. We reject his promise of care. We reject that he is the one who knows what is best for us and we take his role on ourselves. We reject him and choose to try to be gods ourselves. That's what sin is. And yet while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Despite our sin, despite our rejection of him, God continued to love us. Despite our conviction to eternal spiritual death row, God loved us enough to come here as one of us, to put himself in our place, and to die the death that we deserved. Because of his love for us, he submitted himself to a shameful death on a cross – putting himself in the place of the lowest of the low – that we might have life. That God, who loved us, could restore us to his

presence and fellowship. Friends, that's love.

God has shown us his love, he has poured his love into our hearts by his indwelling Spirit, and he calls us to share it with others. Jesus said to his disciples in John 13:35:

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

In fact, St. John offers a disturbing condemnation if we fail here:

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:19-21)

Now it's not the fashion today to talk about sin. People say it makes people feel bad. That's because it should. You see, if we don't talk about sin – if we never grasp the depth of our offence against God we will never truly understand what love is. If we never understand the vileness of our sin, we're left thinking that God loved us because we're in some way, even if only in a small way, worthy of love. And yet we aren't. We're worthy of eternal damnation – worthy of the wrath of God – and yet he loved us enough to die for us. Brothers and sisters, understanding the exceeding sinfulness of our sin is the only way we will ever understand the exceeding loveliness of love. And it's only as we understand the exceeding loveliness of divine love that we will ever be moved to true worship and true service – and be moved to share that love with others. How can we who have experienced the love of God in such an amazing way then deny that love to others? We can't. That's why love becomes the test of faith.

Think of the love of God toward us – toward sinners – as we look at 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with

the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

The love that St. Paul describes here – the love that he's telling us we need to show to others and that supersedes all the gracious gifts of the Spirit – is the same divine and gracious love that God has shown to us in redeeming us with the blood of his Son.

Think of the person in your life you gives you the greatest cause for being impatient or unkind and consider that you've given God even greater cause to be impatient and unkind with you – and instead he has continued to love, to show you his kindnesses and to be more patient than you can ever fully realise.

When we consider the graciousness of God toward us, how can we ever be boastful or jealous? What do we have to boast about? Paul asked back in Chapter 5, "What do you have that you did not receive?" God has given us everything. What business do we have boasting in that which he gives? And for that matter, what reason do we have to envy what he gives to others? How can you be arrogant when everything you have that is good and praiseworthy is from God? How can you be rude to anyone without at the same time thumbing your nose at God's graciousness to you?

How can you insist on your own way when your own Saviour "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:6-8)? And with that in mind, how can you ever be irritable or resentful to others without forgetting how your Saviour humbled himself for your sake?

How can you rejoice at wrongdoing when you consider the great price paid by Jesus Christ on account of your own wrongdoing? And how can you not rejoice at the truth – literally at truthfulness or faithfulness – when you see it, considering that Christ died in order to restore us to the truth and to faith? Again, how can not bear all things, believe all

things, hope all things, and endure all things? How can we do anything but show this kind of love without rejecting the great love that God has first shown to us.

Now getting back to what this has to do with spiritual gifts, Paul goes on:

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. (1 Corinthians 13:8-10)

The Corinthians were developing an obsession with spiritual gifts, but not with love. We really do need to pay attention to our gifts and to be diligent in using them, but it's even more important that we cultivate love in our lives. Without love we miss the point of the gifts. But there's another side to it that Paul hits here and it should help put the difference between the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit in perspective.

Why are the gifts given? They're given to help build and exhort the Kingdom of God here on earth. There's a reason why Paul especially here chooses the three gifts that have revelatory sides to them. Prophecy is a gift of divine revelation. Tongues, when used in public and coupled with the gift of interpretation essentially equates to prophecy, but even if used privately is for the purpose of exhortation and fellowship with God. And knowledge is a gift that often overlaps with prophecy. The gifts are necessary, and yet one day these gifts will cease. One day we will no longer have need of them. When "the perfect comes" these things that are "partial will pass away."

How we understand this hinges on what "the perfect" means. Some modern Christians have argued that it refers to the Scriptures – especially to the time when the writing of the New Testament was finished and the Church came to an agreement on the list of which books were in and which were out. Before we had the New Testament scriptures, the Church relied on direct revelation from God through the Apostles and prophets, but after the Bible was completed the Church no longer had a need for those gifts. Now that argument is *partially* right. Those

who hold that view are trying to protect the sufficiency and uniqueness of Scripture from groups that have arisen in the last century or so who have often placed contemporary New Testament prophecy on an equal footing with the Scripture. The problem is that the Corinthians wouldn't have understood "the perfect" to be a reference to the Scriptures. That interpretation just doesn't fit the context.

What does fit, and what most Christians have historically understood is that Paul is describing the Church on the other side of eternity – the Church (and all of us individual Christians) when we stand with Christ in the presence of the Father having been finally made *perfect*. At that point prophecy and tongues and knowledge become redundant. They're partial. They're God's stooping down to our level and lisping to us. Paul uses the analogy of growing up:

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. (1 Corinthians 13:11-12)

Right now we're children. The purpose of the gifts is to help us along as we mature, but once we've reached maturity, there's no longer any need for those gifts. They're like spiritual training wheels that God will take off the bike when we ride into eternity. The knowledge of God that comes from things like prophecy and tongues and knowledge are like a mirror. In the ancient world they didn't have silvered glass. Mirrors were made of polished bronze or silver and that meant that all except the very best were also very imperfect – and even the best tended to be very dark. The gifts give us an imperfect knowledge of God, kind of like those dark and imperfect mirrors, but one day we will stand with him face to face. We will see him as he is. Whereas now our knowledge and understand of him are imperfect and partial, on that glorious day we will come to know him fully. Karth Barth once said, "Because the sun rises, all lights go out." As we enter his full glory, everything partial will fade and be subsumed in his brightness.

And yet consider that as the gifts and the partial glory they reveal are absorbed in the great fullness of God's glory as we enter his presence, what we will come to know in perfection is love. And the reason the training wheels will come off the bike in eternity is precisely because it's as we enter eternity that we'll be perfected in love. Paul closes the chapter writing:

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Paul puts our sight on the fruit of the Spirit with one final "Oomph!" The purpose of the gifts is to help us as we live out the fruit. Often they're the vehicles by which we live them out or share them with others, but ultimately it's the gifts that serve the fruit and just like the Corinthians we need to keep that perspective or we'll end up undermining the fruit by making too much of the gifts.

And yet, why is love the greatest. Consider that of faith, hope, and love, it's only love that will continue into eternity. When we see God face to face one day, faith will be transformed into sight and hope into reality and yet love will remain. Love is supreme because it reflects the very character of God. God is not faith and he's not hope, but he *is* love.

Two hundred years ago, Jonathan Edwards asked the question: What makes the Church like heaven? And his answer was love. Consider that the Church's manifestation of what we will be on the other side of eternity isn't found in prophecy, tongues, giving, teaching, or any other gift. Brothers and sisters, it's found as the Church shows love – the same love that God showed to us when we were still sinners. That's why he ends this passage, but begins the next in 14:1 with the words:

Make love your aim... (RSV)

Literally, *pursue* love. Set your heart on it. Make it your mission in life. Work at it. Think about it. Follow it. *Pursue* it. That's what the Christian life is about. God showed us love – and showed it to us when we were at our most unlovely – so that we would have such a great appreciation for it, that we can do nothing less than show that love back to him and

so that we can do nothing less than joyfully share it with others. Everything else is either something that helps us minister that love or a waste of our time.

Please pray with me: Father, love does not come naturally to us, and yet you tell us in your Word that love is what you want us to live. Keep the cross of Christ ever before our eyes, that we might always see the example of your supreme love for us. Remind us that your supply of love to us is never-ending. And as we keep our focus on you, remind us today and every day that we "owe no one anything, except to love each other." We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.