



Speaking of Tongues

1 Corinthians 14:1-19

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For the past three weeks we've been looking at what St. Paul had to say to the Corinthians, first about the nature of the Spirit's gifts of grace, then about the nature of the body of Christ, and finally, last week, about the nature of love. And ultimately it's love that ties everything together. The body of Christ is about love, one for each other, and the gifts are about building and exhorting the body. Someday, when we stand for eternity in the direct presence of God – seeing him face to face – we'll come to know and understand divine love in its fullness, and yet here on earth, in the meantime, the Spirit gifts us all, and gifts us differently, in order gradually to grow us in love for God and each other and, again gradually, to bring us into an understanding of that love. That happens in part as we, the body of Christ, gather together and use our gifts to establish and grow that love with each other. But having explained all that, Paul now turns back to the specifics of the Corinthian's problems – and those problems centred on a misunderstanding and abuse of the gift of tongues.

I want to look this week at the first half of Chapter 14, where Paul offers them some corrective teaching on the nature of tongues and prophecy, and then, lord willing, next week we'll look at the second half of the chapter, where Paul gives them instruction on how these gifts are to be used and regulated within the congregation. Look at verse 1:

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.

Pursue love. That's where we left off last time. That's the key when it comes to our use of any and all gifts. Remember that in God's divine math, any number minus one, is always zero if that one is love. You can speak in tongues, you can have amazing divine knowledge, you can even give yourself up for martyrdom, but if it's

not done in a spirit of love, none of it is worth a thing.

So Paul says: "First, make it your priority to pursue love. Second, earnestly desire spiritual gifts and put them to use in *loving* service." And then he says, "But third, especially desire that you may prophesy." Now one thing that's obvious from studying Paul's letter to the Corinthians is that they *really* did desired spiritual gifts. And they had them. Paul said back in Chapter 1 that they were lacking in *no* spiritual gift. The problem was that they were desiring spiritual gifts and using their spiritual gifts *apart from* the fruit of the Spirit – especially apart from love. They had the idea that the gifts were evidence of their spirituality – and that certain gifts, especially tongues – were evidence of *superior* spirituality. And when it came to practicing their gifts, instead of using them to build up the body, they were using their gifts, each for his or her individual benefit and in some cases it sounds like they were using them to show off – the very opposite of what God intended in giving the gifts.

So they said, "Paul, we *do* earnestly desire spiritual gifts." And Paul says, "Good for you. Earnestly desire them, but especially desire that you may prophesy." It's not that prophecy is intrinsically better than another gift. It's not that the person with the gift of prophecy is in any way better, more spiritual, or more in tune with God than anyone else. What Paul gets into here strikes at the heart of the problem. The gifts were given to edify the body, but these people were using the gifts to edify themselves. Specifically, some of them were elevating tongues to be the end-all-be-all of gifts and then abusing that gift for their own personal benefit. Tongues had become the most prominent gift used when they gathered. So, in verse 2, Paul says:

For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit.

First, consider Paul's definition of tongues: it is Spirit-inspired speech that is spoken to God. It's prayer. The primary purpose of the gift of tongues is to communicate with God by means of his own Spirit. It may – and Paul says, sometimes does – serve as a sign to others as it did on Pentecost (we'll look at that aspect more next week), but that's

secondary to the main purpose. It's *prayer* and it's oriented toward *God*. Second, it's clear from the language Paul uses that this gift manifests itself in a *real* language and that what is spoken is *real* speech in that language – not in any way gibberish. The Greek word that Paul uses to describe the gift: *glossa*, refers to real languages, and the words he uses to describe the gift of interpretation that is to accompany tongues when used in public, also make it necessary that we understand tongues to be real language with cognitive, intellectual meaning behind the words – even if we can't understand the meaning ourselves.

That's tongues: it's prayer to God, in the power of the Spirit, spoken in a real language, but one you haven't learned and don't know. The end result, he says, is that the tongues-speaker speaks mysteries – not "mysteries" in any weird sense, but just mysteries in the sense that no one will understand unless they speak that language. And that's Paul's point here: *tongues are unintelligible*. In contrast, he describes the gift of prophecy. Look at verse 3:

On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

Notice the key words there about the one who prophesies: he speaks to *people*, not to God, and he does it for the *upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation* of the people to whom the prophecy is spoken. So he says in verses 4-6:

The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up. Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?

There's the key difference as far as the issue is concerned here. Tongues builds up the speaker, but doesn't really do anything for the hearers, whereas prophecy does do something for the hearers – it's a gift that builds up the body. A whole church full of people speaking in tongues is a whole church full of people

building up *themselves* when they should be building up *each other*.

Now let me be clear – because Paul is very clear here – he’s not suggesting that tongues is a bad thing and it’s not that receiving personal exhortation from the use of tongues is a bad thing – that’s a central purpose of the gift. Paul is in no way forbidding the use of this Spirit-given gift, nor is he allocating it to some lesser spot in the hierarchy of gifts.

Remember the body metaphor. Just because the foot isn’t a hand is no reason for anyone to think that the foot is any less important. However, when the body has a job to do, one or another part may be more important in performing that function. The hand is critical if you want to write a letter. Try writing a letter with your foot and you won’t get very far. But that doesn’t devalue the foot. Try walking a mile on your hands and you’ll have the same kind of problem! These last few chapters are dealing with the Church when it gathers together. And in that context, the Corinthian elevation of tongues in the assembly is sort of like trying to write a letter with your foot or walk on your hands. It’s not the tool for the job. It’s not that there’s anything wrong with the tool, it’s just that it’s not the right one for that job. When we gather corporately the purpose is for us to exhort – to build up – each other. Prophecy does that. (And it’s not the only gift that does so.) Tongues, one the other hand builds up the individual, which isn’t the point when we gather together.

He says, “I wish you all spoke in tongues.” It’s not that we all should – he already told us in Chapter 12 that we all have *different* gifts. He’s just saying, “It would be great if you all spoke in tongues – it’s a wonderful gift – but when you gather together, your focus needs to be on using the gifts that build up the *church*.” And this is where he adds the one instance where tongues does build up the church: when it’s accompanied by interpretation. At that point tongues serves essentially the same function as prophecy. Why? Because it becomes *intelligible*. And why is intelligibility important? Because when we gather to worship together, the goal is to build up each other. If we can all understand it, then it builds us up. If we can’t understand, at best it’s only building up the speaker. In order to be built up, the

church needs “some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching” in order to grow. To make the point he gives us a couple of vivid illustrations. Look at verses 7 to 12:

If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

Consider meaning in musical terms. A bugler who knew the language of music and of bugling could, with just a few notes, wake the army or put them to sleep, he could call them to duty or stand them down, he could make them march or make them rest. But you couldn’t just have anyone blowing any old notes on the bugle. For it to do any good, what was played on the bugle had to be *intelligible*.

Paul says that the church is like that army. We need to hear God’s message, but if it comes to us in a language we don’t speak, how will it do us any good? I could take that bugle and blow it all day, but the army wouldn’t have any idea what I wanted them to do because what I was blowing into it would have no meaning to them.

Or imagine if I came to the pulpit and decided to read the lesson to you in Greek and Hebrew. We all know that we need to hear God’s Word, but how much good would it do you to hear it in a language you don’t know? The Corinthians were eager for manifestations of the Spirit, but when they were gathered together, tongues wasn’t the answer. Again, a good tool, but not the right tool for that particular job. Instead, in that context, to benefit the body, they needed gifts like revelation, prophecy, knowledge, and teaching – gifts that would share something that would be understood. He says, “Strive to excel in

building up the church,” *not* building up yourself. For that reason he goes on in verse 13:

Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. (1 Corinthians 14:13-15)

He says, if your gift is tongues and you want to edify not only yourself, but the rest of the body, pray that God will reveal the meaning. Pray with your spirit – pray in tongues – but don’t leave it there. If you’re going to speak or sing in tongues in church, Paul’s requirement is that you also share that same prayer intelligibly so that your brothers and sisters will understand it. Praying in tongues, whether it’s spoken or sung, doesn’t engage the mind. It’s not intelligible and intelligibility is the key to edification of others. So go ahead and let the Spirit pray through you, *but* make sure that you also pray with your mind – make sure that the other half of the gift, interpretation, goes along with it so that the tongues will benefit everyone.

Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. (1 Corinthians 14:16-17)

Verse 17 is Paul’s definitive word on the matter. The purpose of what goes on here is to build up the body, but if what is said can’t be understood, it’s falling short. Intelligibility is key. Paul talks about the outsider. He’s not talking about a non-Christian who happens to wander into our worship service. The language Paul uses is meant to simply point to someone who does not share the gift of tongues that the speaker has. First, this is a *corporate* gathering of Christ’s body, and second, in order to be edifying, what is shared or spoken needs to be something to which we all say “Amen.” If the rest of us can’t understand you, how can we say “Amen”? You may be legitimately praising God. You may be saying something wonderful, but if no one can understand, no one can

add his “Amen” and no one but you is built up.

Paul’s conclusion here is extremely forceful. Look at verses 18 to 19.

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

He drops back into the first person and thanks God that he speaks in tongues more than any of them did. His point all along has been to correct the people in Corinth who were misusing their gift of tongues and so he very pastorally identifies himself with them. “I’m one of you, folks. I speak in tongues too – in fact more than you do – so don’t think I don’t understand you or that I don’t understand the gift. I speak in tongues and I speak in tongues a lot.” But then we get this amazing insight into Paul the Christian – something we’d never know if it hadn’t been for him needing to offer this correction. He speaks in tongues a lot, and yet he tells them, “Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct other, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

This totally crushes the view that to use tongues in private is to abuse the gift. Consider, Paul says that he speaks in tongues more than all the Corinthians. But he also says that he’d rather speak five intelligible words in church than ten thousand in a tongue. Five versus ten *thousand*. It’s a bit of hyperbole, but it effective in making the point that what we share with each other has to be intelligible in order to build up our brothers and sisters. That *if* you use this gift in the church, it *must* be interpreted. So if tongues is not a gift mainly intended for public consumption and yet Paul used it more than all of the Corinthians, the only thing we can conclude is that he exercised his remarkable gift of tongues almost entirely in *private*.

Now, what does this mean for us aside from the practical advice on the use of these gifts? The last few chapters should teach us two things. The first is that true worship and service are motivated by the knowledge of God’s love for us, the mercy he has shown to us, and the grace he has

given us. And the second is that none of us is a spiritual island. Christ knits us together into *one* body, and that means that worship and service are, at their very core, things we do as *one* – things we do *together*.

We need to remember that our faith, and therefore our worship, is rooted in something objective. Our God is a thinking and speaking God and he talks to us so that our knowledge of him will grow – and so that as our knowledge of him grows, our love for him will grow too. That means that the most valuable gifts in the assembly are the gifts that intelligibly communicate to us the knowledge of God and of his saving works. If you want to experience richer worship and service, you first need to experience a deeper and richer love for God – and that will only come as you grow to know and understand him better. This is why the centres of our worship of God are his Word and the Sacrament in which we commemorate his saving work on the cross.

But the cross drives us to the other side of worship – to the fact that we worship *together as one body*. Like the Corinthians, we often forget this side of it and we come to worship focused on self. One of the problems with a lot of modern forms of worship is that we end up coming to assemble together, and yet we each do our own thing. Our focus is on “me” as we sing songs about “me” and *my* feelings and *my* experience. We each come to have “my” needs met and ultimately what we end up doing is having our own personal devotional time in a corporate setting. Friends, that’s not right, because if my focus is on “me”, it means it’s not on “us”, and in the end it means that my focus is on building up myself, not building up the body. Remember, Paul calls us to pursue love first and foremost. That means that as we each come in the door, we set aside *self* so that we can join with *each other* and exhort, teach, and build up the whole body in our knowledge of the love of God. That, friends, is what *true* worship is all about.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, thank you for both the gift of saving grace you have given to us and for the gracious gifts of your Spirit with which you have empowered us. Remind us always that our gifts have been given that we might exhort and grow each other in your

knowledge and love. Father, move us to use our gifts profitably that we might grow together into deeper faith in you and be moved to love and serve each other and the world. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.