

A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

1 Corinthians 13

Introduction:

The Corinthian church was a church that had a lot going for it. Corinth was a city of considerable influence in the world of Paul's day. It was situated at a strategic location for trade and commerce. ESV Study Bible says that its location "...made it a flourishing crossroads for sea traffic between the Aegean region and the western Mediterranean. It was a place where many cultures and religions mingled."

Because of this the church in Corinth certainly had the opportunity to also have a huge influence in world around it. In the opening words of this epistle written by Paul to the church there, he addresses them as saints, sanctified in Christ Jesus. He gives thanks for the grace that saved them, for the spiritual gifts that were evident in them, and their hope as they waited for the coming of Christ.

But it soon becomes apparent that there were serious problems in the Corinthian church. They were divided over many things. They argued over who was the best and most trustworthy among the apostles and teachers – Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter). Then there were those who went right over the top – "I follow Christ."

There was conflict in the Corinthian church over sin that they were unwilling to deal with. They were divided over Christian liberty and whether certain activities were acceptable for Christians. We looked at some length in chapters 8-10 at this issue, and we are not going to rehash it all again, except to say this: when it comes to the issue of what is acceptable for a believer to participate in and how I practice the liberty I have in Christ, there are three important questions to consider:

1. How will the practice of my Christian liberty affect other believers?
2. How will the practice of my Christian liberty affect unbelievers and their response to the gospel?
3. How will the practice of my Christian liberty affect my own walk with God?

In chapter 12 Paul got into the question of spiritual gifts and church life as the body of Christ. Here we once again see the division and conflict which existed in the church in Corinth. As you read through chapters 12-14, this conflict becomes evident.

Chapter 12 – Paul first addressed the foundational truths about spiritual gifts:

1. There are varieties of spiritual gifts, they are beneficial to different areas of ministry, and are used in different ways in those ministries.
2. All gifts come from the same Spirit, are used in service to the same Lord, and are empowered by the same God.
3. All gifts are distributed by the Spirit, as he sees fit.

As he continues, Paul moves into an exposition of the body of Christ and the relationship of the various members of the body. Whatever our gift, it is given for the purpose of fulfilling our role in the body of Christ. At the close of chapter 12, he lists a number of spiritual gifts—certainly not an exhaustive list—and then asks a series of rhetorical questions intended to show that one gift is not above another.

It seems that the believers in Corinth had a severe problem with egotism and what I call one-up-man-ship. Everyone had a desire to outdo the others. Just as they sought to outdo each other over who had the best teacher, so they tried to outdo each other in the area of spiritual gifts. *"Well, my gift is..."*

When you go on to chapter 14, you see this extended even further. It seems that the believers in Corinth were more interested in promoting gifts that drew attention to themselves than they were in using gifts to build and strengthen the body of Christ. Spiritual gifts became a source of self-promotion and a way of getting approval and glory from others, rather than a means of serving and ministering to others.

But in between these two chapter we have 1 Corinthians 13 – the love chapter. Paul begins by saying, *"I will show you a still more excellent way."* (1 Cor. 12:31b) *Discuss the strange chapter division...*

Paul points out in this chapter that there is something far more important than who has what gift, or whose gift is most important. What matters is our motive and the attitude we have toward others.

The Importance of Love vv. 1-3

In the first three verses of this chapter, Paul gives us three illustrations to point out how critical our attitude is when it comes to our service to others. We need to begin by considering the meaning of the word love as Paul uses it here in this chapter.

The word Paul uses is the Greek word *agape*. It is generally understood to refer to the kind of love shown by God. It is love which is based on the will rather than on natural affection or personal benefit. It is love that is unconditional, genuine, and committed to the one loved.

With that in mind let's look at these images that Paul puts forth:

Verse 1 – Tongues of men and angels

Read verse 1 – the Corinthian believers appear to have placed great value on the gift of being able to speak in tongues. The word Paul uses refers to the literal tongue that is in your mouth, or also to a language that is spoken by a particular people distinct from that of other nations. So, what Paul is saying is this: If I had such a gift that I could speak in any language known to man, or even beyond that in the languages of angels...

I don't know what kind of language the angels speak. In my mind they speak English, but that of course is because I speak English. Is there a heavenly language that is different than anything here on earth? I don't know. But this is really a hypothetical point that Paul is making. If I have the greatest gift of tongues anyone has ever had, and could speak all the languages of earth and heaven, what does he say?

If I don't have love, I am just a noisy gong (sounding brass) or a clanging cymbal. What can you say about such things? They make a lot of noise and they attract a lot of attention but are harsh and irritating. It seems to me that Paul is making the point that if the use of our spiritual gifts is not motivated by love for others then what we are doing is self-serving and all we are really doing is attracting attention.

I cannot help but think of Jesus' accusation of the Pharisees and their religiosity in Matt. 6. Their giving, their prayers, their fasting was not out of love for God but only to show how spiritual they were.

That seems to be what Paul is saying about those who apply their gifts to bolster their own appearance rather than out of love for the members of the body and the desire to build up and edify the body of Christ.

Verse 2 – All prophecy and knowledge

Read v. 2 – Prophetic powers – the gift of prophecy – literally “If I have prophecy...” So, what is prophecy? A Greek dictionary defines the word this way: “*a discourse emanating from divine inspiration and declaring the purposes of God, whether by reproving and admonishing the wicked, or comforting the afflicted, or revealing things hidden;*”

Linked with Paul's following statements – *read them* – he is again speaking hypothetically. Even if I had perfect knowledge, the very mind of God himself... if I could understand and know everything he knows and had the kind of faith that invoked divine powers to even move mountains... if I do not exercise those gifts with love, they are meaningless, and I am nothing.

I think that Paul is saying to his readers and to us that we need to be careful about our motives and attitudes when it comes to gifts. I am not going to get into the debate about whether the gift of prophecy is for today. I don't think that is critical to Paul's warning here. So what is he saying?

We may have great knowledge and understanding of the things of God. We may know and understand the deep mysteries of Scripture. We may be able to dig into the Scripture and determine good from bad, right from wrong, “...rightly dividing the word of truth...” as Paul reminded Timothy.

But if we use that gift and that knowledge only to criticize and condemn, rather than building others up in love, Paul says, “...I am nothing.” It becomes a detriment rather than a benefit to the body of Christ.

Verse 3 – Giving up everything for Christ

Read v. 3 – Now Paul goes even beyond the idea of spiritual gifts to the area of self-sacrifice, giving up everything for the sake of Christ. And he says, even if I give away everything I own, give all my possessions to

help the poor, and even surrender my very body and give up my life, if I am not doing it for the right reason, it will gain me nothing.

Let's think about this for a minute. What does Paul mean by this? Giving up everything – isn't that what Jesus called us to do?

Luke 9:23-25 – “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?”

Luke 14:26-27 – “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”

Yes, we are called to a life of surrender. But Paul says that if our intent, our motivation is not out of love for God and love for others, then we are wasting our time. There is no eternal reward for selfishness, for self-exaltation. If what we are looking for in our sacrifice is the approval and praise of others, then our sacrifice is worthless.

When you look at the substance of what Paul presents in these 3 verses, you get a picture of the problem that Paul was confronting in the church in Corinth. And we need to take his warning to heart because it is easy for the same thing to arise in our church because of the sinfulness in our own hearts.

Paul was concerned because the believers in Corinth were placing themselves and pride in their gifts ahead of the good of the body of Christ. They were promoting sign gifts – tongues, healing, etc. – as being most important, because these were things that drew attention. They seemed to believe that these gifts showed their spirituality. They believed that they had some special knowledge and insight, but they were using that insight to tear down the body of Christ rather than building and edifying the body.

And so Paul says to them, and us, I want to show you a more excellent way, the way of love, which puts others first.

The Permanence of Love vv. 8-13

There is one other point I want to make this morning. We are passing over vv. 4-7 today – *Explain*. But in vv. 8-13 Paul points out why love is so important. I want to wrap up this morning with a few thoughts from these verses – *read vv. 8-13*.

There is so much that could be said from this passage. We may need to come back to it in the future. But there is one key thought that we need to see to bring this whole passage into context.

Love never ends... Prophecy, tongues, knowledge, any other gift or talent that you have, that God has given to the church will one day not be needed any more. I'm not getting into whether or not certain sign gifts ceased at the end of the apostolic age. By the way, I believe they did, but that is not the point.

The point is that eventually all gifts will end. When this age comes to an end, and the church is taken away, there will be no need for spiritual gifts. But love is eternal. It is the love with which we treat one another that is going to have eternal consequences.

Jesus said,

- *“This is my commandment, that you love one another.”*
- *“By this will all men know that you are my disciples, by the love you have for one another.”*
- *“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.”*

Paul said,

- *“Love one another with brotherly affection.”*
- *“Owe no one anything, except to love each other,”*
- *“‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up.”*

And now he says, unless we exercise our spiritual gifts out of a heart of love, we are wasting our time and the gift God has given us. It is only as we express our gifts in love for one another that we can have an eternal impact. Faith, hope and love are all that really last eternally, and as Paul says, the greatest of these is love.