

Lecture 17 "Spiritual Gifts"

1 Corinthians 13:1 – 14:40

First of all, I want to thank each one of you for your gifts and cards and many expressions of love that made my birthday last week very memorable. Perhaps it's fitting that I have the opportunity to teach on what we know as the "love" chapter of God's Word since I've received so much of it from you.

We often hear the familiar verses in Chapter 13:4-7 describing love used as a part of wedding ceremonies because it's the ideal of what love should be. But love in the context of 1 Corinthians 13 is not a feeling . . . it's a decision.

We have no need to rehearse the congregational makeup and conditions existing in the infant church at Corinth. Paul's letter of 1 Corinthians is written to this local church to address their concerns and questions and give them much needed guidelines for both worship and ministry.

Last week we learned that the worship practices of these Corinthians were hindering a solid foundation for effective ministry. Much of that lesson focused on the condition of their hearts, as well as ours, and challenged both our expectations of worship and the attitudes we bring to worship.

In the chapters before us today, Paul continues to discuss

worship and ministry. But now he becomes more specific. He moves from the realm of our attitude to the actual mechanics of how worship should work. By mechanics I don't mean an order of worship such as pray, sing, hear a sermon, take communion, give an offering, pray and go home (or some variation of that), but an orderly worship experience. Paul wants to describe actions that will enhance our worship and, therefore, enhance our ministry to one another and to the unbelieving community around us.

With that in mind, let's examine four facts from 1 Corinthians chapters 13 & 14:

1. God is faithful.
2. God is love.
3. God is a God of order.
4. God is a God of peace.
5. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Let's take a look at these points.

God is faithful

Jesus promised His disciples that when He went away He would send the Holy Spirit to comfort them, equip them and lead them into all truth. God is faithful. He did just that by equipping

the church with diverse spiritual gifts to be used for the common good of the body. But, like a baby will squabble over toys and always want to have what another is using, Paul needed to restore order in this Corinthian church. His approach was firm:

- Orderly worship is built on love.
- Orderly worship ministers to the whole church, not just to the individual.
- Orderly worship brings conviction to the hearts of unbelievers.
- Orderly worship should be conducted in fitting way to reflect the God of peace.

At the end of Chapter 12, Paul challenged us to desire the greater gifts. By definition, the greater gifts are those that do the most to promote the common good. And on the heels of that comment, Paul launched into a lengthy discourse on love in Chapter 13. What does love have to do with spiritual gifts and orderly worship? Everything!

In American culture, we discuss love as if it were just an emotion. But Scripture makes it clear that love is an act of the will – a decision. Therefore, the proper exercise of love will have a radical effect upon how we worship and how we minister. That's why Paul emphatically states that any spiritual gift that is used apart from the foundation of love is completely and totally

useless. So, then, we must ask this question, "In practical terms, what does it mean to build orderly worship upon a foundation of love?"

It means we put the needs of others ahead of our own needs. It means we must be willing to do whatever is necessary to promote unity and harmony within the Body of Christ. It means we will go to great lengths – and even be willing to inconvenience ourselves – to avoid placing any stumbling block in the way of another Christian. And it means that any time we are corporately gathered – whether in worship, in a Bible study, or in a prayer group – we recognize that our gifts must be exercised for the common good; not our own.

So if you or I exercise a spiritual gift to attract attention to ourselves; if we exercise a gift to show others how spiritual we are; if we view others who do not have our particular gift as spiritually inferior; if we find any vestige of pride within ourselves as we use a particular gift; then our use of that gift is not rooted and grounded in the love of Jesus Christ and we nullify the positive effect that God intends for these spiritual gifts to have. When that happens, we not only fail to promote the common good, we can actually do harm to the body of Christ.

God is love

Orderly worship is built on a foundation of love because love reflects the very essence of the character of God. According to the Scriptures, love is not something that God does, love is who God is. Therefore, as we grow to become more like Christ, the very essence of my character – the very essence of your character – should reflect the love of God. So then, love is important not just because it shapes what we do, but because it reflects who we are.

If we follow the description of godly love spelled out in verses 4-7 . . . love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres . . . and if these characteristics typify our character and our behavior when we come together, then our worship will be orderly and will bring honor and glory to the name and the reputation of Jesus Christ.

Paul then proceeds to tell us that love never fails, but spiritual gifts (like prophecy and tongues and words of knowledge) will pass away. Why does he make this statement?

Because spiritual gifts are temporary for this life, while love – since it springs from the character of God – is eternal. God brings our spiritual gifts into operation only at certain times and in certain ways to meet certain needs.

For example, I believe I have the gift of teaching, but I do not spend all my time teaching. But regardless of what gifts you and I have, we're all called to spend all our time loving God and loving one another. God's love is eternal and He wants His love to operate in us and through us continually. So, my spiritual gifts shape what I do . . . Christ's love in me shapes who I am.

What is the most perfect example of love that we have? It's the cross. Picture the vertical beam as God reaching down to us and the horizontal beam as us reaching out to each other. In the center, and bringing the two together, is perfect love manifested in the person of Jesus Christ. Right now we can only partially comprehend that depth of love, but when we see that perfect love face to face, we will know love fully, just as we are fully known by a loving God.

Whenever we come across a passage of Scripture that discusses spiritual gifts, the questions usually asked are: What are they? Do they still exist? Which ones do I have? Let me give you a definitive answer – this is not a lesson about having

spiritual gifts, it's about using our spiritual gifts. As to what they are, we covered that in your lesson preparation and Dan did a good job of describing them to you last week. As to their existence and your particular giftedness, I invite you to read any one of the myriad volumes published that are fully devoted to just those subjects.

Suffice it to say, since all the gifts are temporary in this life and meant to be used for the common good of building up or edifying the church, we should place less emphasis on them and instead emphasize living a life filled with – and directed by – the eternal love of Jesus Christ.

When we have our priorities straight, we will be able to keep our use of the gifts in proper perspective. This results in more orderly worship and more orderly ministry to each other and to those outside the Christian community.

Paul summarizes all of his teaching about love in the final words in chapter 13. He makes it clear that faith, hope, and love are far more important than any specific spiritual gift, and that the greatest of those three is love.

Someone who never speaks in tongues, never heals anyone, never preaches a sermon, or never teaches a Bible lesson may make more impact on the world than any of us in this room if

their life is characterized by their faith in Jesus Christ, their hope in Jesus Christ, and their ability to reflect the love of Jesus Christ in every aspect of their life.

This brings me to my third point:

God is a God of order

As we move into Chapter 14, we must remember that Paul was not writing a systematic theology on spiritual gifts. He was writing to a specific church to correct problems that resulted in disorderly worship. In particular, these people had over-emphasized the gift of tongues. How many of you have no clue as to what Paul was talking about when he speaks of tongues?

Briefly and generally it is defined as either 1) speaking in a known language that the speaker has had no formal instruction in; or 2) a language that is an ecstatic utterance, often called a prayer language, that sounds like babbling to those without that gift.

With that in mind let me continue . . .

The Corinthians were excited about this gift of tongues to the exclusion of meeting the needs of the rest of the body. As a result, their worship was not built on love and was not promoting the common good.

The key point occurs in verse 4, where Paul reminds the

church that the person who speaks in a tongue, without interpretation, edifies only himself or herself, while the person who prophesies edifies the entire church. The two gifts simply illustrate the larger issue: "When you participate in worship, whose needs are you concerned about meeting?" Or, stated differently, "When you exercise a gift designed for the common good, are you using that gift according to its intended purpose?"

Since orderly worship is built on a foundation of love, and since the spiritual gifts are designed to promote the common good, Paul makes it clear that the only beneficial use of tongues in a corporate setting is when it is interpreted.

It's interesting that some churches teach that Paul is actually talking about the two different gifts in this text: the personal gift of tongues which is a private prayer language for most (if not all) believers, and the corporate gift of tongues which is designed for public worship when accompanied by interpretation.

As I prayerfully read the text, however, it simply does not state this. Paul does not differentiate between a corporate and personal gift of tongues; he differentiates between tongues that are interpreted which can benefit the body of Christ and uninterpreted tongues that can detract from orderly worship.

And since we might not always know if someone with the

gift of interpretation is present, Paul says it is better to speak five intelligible words to instruct others, than to speak ten thousand words in a tongue. Why? Because, in an orderly worship service, all spiritual gifts are designed to minister to the whole church not just to the individual exercising the gift.

Paul even goes one step further by quoting from Isaiah in verse 21. He lets us know that tongues, when they are understood, actually are a sign for unbelievers.

So, how can tongues be a sign for unbelievers? Well, when they are understood – either because the speaker is using a human language or because an interpreter is present – tongues cannot simply be explained away. They are a clear miracle of God that can arouse the curiosity of those outside the faith and make them willing to listen to God's message. That is exactly what happened on the Day of Pentecost! The tongues poured out on the church that day were not a private prayer language; they were designed to bring lost people to the foot of the cross.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus told His disciples that He would pour out His Spirit so they could be His witnesses. It happened in Acts 2:1-6, "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were

sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language."

And so on Pentecost, the gift of tongues enabled the church to witness for Jesus Christ. One of God's primary purposes in giving us the Holy Spirit is to enable us to reach lost people with the good news of Jesus Christ.

- The power of the gospel convicts of sin and affirms the need for repentance.
- Understanding the message of the gospel unleashes the power for salvation.

And so, once again, we see that we are in error if we focus the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit primarily upon ourselves.

In the latter part of Chapter 14, Paul lays out some highly specific instructions to help this disorderly church bring some order to its worship services. Rather than bedlam, with everyone praying in tongues at once, he tells them to do things one at a

time so that everyone can understand . . . particularly visitors who might come in. Paul was always concerned for the unchurched and the unreached. Do we share that concern?

I don't know if any of you have ever been in a service where Christians were praying aloud in tongues since it's not a practice here at Eastside. As a young girl growing up in a home that had no particular religious direction, I frequently joined friends as I was invited to attend their church service. Some of those churches were what we term "Charismatic" or "Pentecostal." Tongues were spoken all over the auditorium and all I could hear was a great babble of noise as people prayed aloud. It was very confusing to me.

Now as I read what Paul says here in verses 16-19, I'm drawn to agree. How can the listener who doesn't understand say, "Amen"? Again, we should say, with Paul, that five intelligible words are far more important to the church than a whole stream of tongues.

God Is a God of Peace

This brings us to Paul's point that orderly worship should be conducted in a fitting way to reflect the God of peace. Paul instructs the women to be silent. (No doubt that's how he got the reputation for being a "woman hater.") So, how can this be,

since back in chapter 11 he stated that women are free to pray and to prophesy?

I believe he means that the silence of women is a qualified silence. Women were to keep silent about questions that they should properly ask their husbands at home; that is what he tells us in verse 35.

The Jewish women had suffered for years under a male-dominated religious system where they were not allowed to learn about spiritual matters. Women in Greek culture also led very secluded lives. But now, all of a sudden, they were allowed full participation in the life of the church. Much of this was tremendously confusing to them, because it was completely new. Many of these new Christians were filled with questions about the teachings and practices of the church and, evidently, many of the women were disrupting the services with continual whispering as they turned to their husbands and asked for clarification.

Some commentators offer the opinion that the women were arguing or gossiping or perhaps continually interrupting.

Paul says that this was disgrace because it brings dishonor on the church when anyone – male or female – disrupts the service. Paul wanted the church to maintain order so that the body of Christ would be strengthened and so that the reputation

of Jesus Christ would be enhanced in the community. People need to know that God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

Well, we've talked about the fact that **God is faithful**. He promised the Holy Spirit and His spiritual gifts to establish and grow the church body. We talked about the fact that **God is love** and that orderly worship is built on love, and that orderly worship ministers to the whole church, not just to the individual, and that orderly worship brings conviction to the hearts of unbelievers. And we talked about the fact that **God is a God of order** and that orderly worship should be conducted in a fitting way to reflect the **God of peace**.

There's one last point – **God is the same yesterday, today and forever**. Proverbs 8:13 "I hate pride and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse speech." Paul chastised the Corinthians for their pride in thinking they were the only Christians and that they were the only ones with the Word of God. How could they have gotten so far off the mark as to foster divisions over who baptized them, tolerate immoral behavior in their ranks, bring lawsuits against one another and abuse the Lord's Supper as well as boast of their spiritual gifts? It was pride, pure and simple.

Just as they needed to recommit themselves to worship for

effective ministry, perhaps we do too. Our eternal Lord is worthy of our worship. He was yesterday, He is today, and will be forever!

Let the church stop arguing about tongues . . . pro or con . . . because as Paul points out in Chapter 12 it's the least important gift for building up the church. Instead, let us focus on the essentials:

- let us worship God in an orderly fashion by allowing the law of love to be our highest goal.
- let us exercise our gifts to minister to one another, not to selfishly bless ourselves.
- let us worship in such a way that unbelievers who come to our services will fall on their knees and join us in honoring the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

It's no secret that I prefer we sing the old classic hymns here at People of the Word not just because I'm "old" but because unless the younger generation hears them, they will fail to appreciate the richness and Scriptural impact they have to stir our faith. Listen to these stirring lyrics of worship by Robert Grant:

O Worship the King, all glorious above
And gratefully sing His wonderful love;

Our Shield and Defender, The Ancient of Days,
Pavilioned in splendor, and girded with praise.

O tell of His might, O sing of His grace,
Whose robe is the light, whose canopy space!
His chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form,
And dark is His path on the wings of the storm.

Thy bountiful care what tongue can recite?
It breathes in the air, it shines in the light,
It streams from the hills, it descends to the plain,
And sweetly distills in the dew and the rain.

Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,
In Thee do we trust, nor find Thee to fail.
Thy mercies how tender, how firm to the end,
Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.

While God the Holy Spirit may distribute any of His particular spiritual gifts to each as He desires, we can enjoy every fruit of the Spirit in our lives. Galatians 5:22,23 – But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control.

So, as we worship together, and for the good of the body of Christ, let us follow Paul's admonition in Colossians 3:12-14 –
Therefore, as God chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe

yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Amen.