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## Sermon

### ***Spiritual Gifts are to be Used in Love***

**1 Corinthians 13**

31<sup>st</sup> January 2016

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Two weeks ago, Roy preached from 1 Cor 12 on the gifts of the Spirit. He gave you some homework to do – what was that? What did you learn or discover?

Last week, we heard the continuation of that chapter with the body imagery – we are all members of the same body. Remember the letters to the Corinthians were written to correct problems in the young church in Corinth. In this case, a problem of boasting and pride in the exercise of spiritual gifts.

The gifts of the Spirit are the tools God gives us to get the job done. They are not intended for boasting and showing how important we are, but they are equipment for those extending the rule of King Jesus.

Do you remember the list Paul gave in 1 Cor 12:8-10? These gifts are used to help people with wise insight or practical revelation; a Christian may be given faith to allow extraordinary events to occur; some may have gifts of bringing healing to others or working of miracles. Christians may use the gift of prophecy to speak words of strength, encouragement or comfort from God to other people. The discernment of spirits allows a distinguishing between the divine, the human and the diabolical – not always as obvious as you might think but very useful to know! Finally, God inspires the use of languages and interpretation of unknown languages to his glory.

So having listed these gifts and made the point that we are all members of the same body so there is no idea of competition but rather of mutual support and help, he continues with this chapter 13. The important thing to understand is that 13 comes after 12 and before 14! Chapter 12 was not written by itself; Paul did not set out to write a description of love for use at weddings!

No, Paul is writing about love in the context of the use of spiritual gifts. Chapter 12 introduces the subject and ends with:

<sup>12:31</sup> But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.

He thus comes into our reading today. The verse following the reading is:

<sup>14:1</sup> Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

He continues in chapter 14 to give guidance for the use of prophecy, tongues and interpretation. So chapter 13 is squarely in the midst of a discussion of the use of spiritual gifts.

So what do we learn about using spiritual gifts from chapter 13?

## **Zeal**

Firstly, in those verses immediately before and after this chapter, we are commanded to desire eagerly the spiritual gifts. It is not a ho-hum matter. Paul actually says we should be zealous for them. I wonder if you are? If not, why not? Ignorance? Fear? Despair? God wants to give us good gifts to help us do his work and tells us to be zealous to have them – we need to take that seriously; we need to seek what he tells us to seek.

## **Gifts without love are valueless**

Secondly, without love the gifts are worthless. Look at verses 1-3. Paul gives us some examples of spiritual gifts without love.

V1: You may speak in tongues, but if it is done without love it is of no more value than a clanging cymbal or a sounding brass. He is probably referring to amplification brasses used in the Greek theatres which help project the actors' voices. The sense is that without love the sound is hollow and worthless.

V2: You may the gift of prophecy with tremendous insight and faith to be able to move mountains – but without love you are nothing.

In the eighteenth century, two young German Mennonite Christians were determined to take the gospel to the slaves in Barbados. Since they were denied access to the slaves by the slave owners, they hatched a plan to sell themselves as slaves so they could work among them and so gain access to them. Can you imagine such zeal to save a group of people? They were not able in fact to sell themselves but they did manage to persuade the authorities to allow them access to the slaves to preach to them.

In verse 3, Paul gives the example of someone giving all his possessions to the poor and even selling his own body to benefit the poor (see the marginal reading) – a practice that was apparently known in the ancient world. But he says that if such an act were done but not in love it would be worthless.

The point is, you may have a gift but you must use it with love not for selfish reasons or it is worthless.

Verses 4-7 continue with a description of love. I am not going to explore it in detail here, you have probably heard me speak on it in some weddings. What would we say about this love? It is unselfish and desires the best for the other person. It is worth reading it again substituting “Jesus” for “love.”

Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind. He does not envy, does not boast, is not proud, etc.

He provides the perfect model to help us understand what love is like. But note that this is not a sentimental picture. Jesus was all-loving yet could at the same time clear the temple in righteous indignation. He could berate the religious leaders of his day for their hypocrisy. This love is intelligent and tough. It does not disguise or unleash anger; it does not remove irritants from your life.

What does it do? It meets your deepest need and enable you to respond differently to your circumstances. It give the power to communicate anger appropriately and increases our gratitude for the way God has worked in our lives.

## **Gifts will cease**

From verse 8, Paul introduces the idea of the gifts ceasing.

He gives examples of the gifts or prophesy, tongues and the word of knowledge. One day they will cease – when will that be – when perfection comes. Some have taught that this was when the Bible was finalized but that is foreign to this passage. It is more obvious that Paul means when the Lord returns. If we aren't sure of that, we find it in chapter 1:7-8:

You do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Clearly the use of the gifts will continue until Jesus returns. Our use of the gifts now is imperfect – something we all need to remember either when using them or receiving what others have done.

Paul continues with an analogy of maturing from childhood to adulthood. When would we claim to be mature? When we studied Ephesians we saw it was ultimate destination of the church – once again when Jesus returns for us.

As Paul contemplates that future state, in verse 12 he expounds on how we will know the Lord fully rather than in a cloudy way. We will know fully as we are fully known.

But finally, we will be left with faith, hope and love. Trust in the Lord, begun here will continue forever. Hope will expand and issue into an eternal expectation of his perfect plan for our eternal life with him. Love will deepen in that setting of full knowing and seeing into something yet more wonderful and beautiful as it is given full expression.

Thus Paul urges the Corinthians to be zealous for the gifts but to use them in love, knowing love is the ultimate value and enduring characteristic.