

1 Corinthians 13

- As we end chapter 12 and enter chapter 13 in our study of spiritual gifts in the church, Paul is about to transition out of teaching and into correction
 - He's laid down the ground rules for how and why the church is gifted by the Holy Spirit
 - He's explained the nature of our gifting, the manner of it's arrival
 - He's emphasized the purpose God has in assigning gifts to the body
 - So now it's time to compare those principles against what the Corinthians were actually practicing in the church in use of their spiritual gifts
 - And the result isn't going to be pretty
 - We stopped our study in chapter 12 at v.27, where Paul summarized the main point of teaching
 - The members of the church collectively represent Christ's physical body on earth while we await His physical return
 - Every member is important and has a purpose in God's plan
 - Every member must be actively engaged if the body is to be its most effective
 - Moreover, we don't need nor do we want everyone to minister in the same ways much less to possess the same gift
 - And in fact, it's not even possible, for the Lord has gifted us as He wished from the moment we were saved
- As we prepare to leave chapter 12, Paul now turns to applying these truths to the situation in Corinth
 - And as we'll see, the church was operating quite differently from the standards of scripture

[1Cor. 12:27](#) Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.

[1Cor. 12:28](#) And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.

- I began by repeating v.27 to set the context, and then we see Paul moving another list of gifts
 - Like the list from earlier in this chapter, this list of gifts reads as a set of examples, not a comprehensive or exhaustive catalog of gifts
 - In fact, notice that this list differs from the earlier list Paul gave
 - There is some repetition but some prior gifts have dropped off and new one have been added
 - This inconsistency among various lists of gifts is clear indication to us that Paul likes to use these lists as examples to illustrate a larger point
 - So let's not miss the forest for the trees
 - Rather than focusing on lists of gifts, let's stay focused on the point Paul is trying to make
 - So what is Paul's point now?
- To answer that question, we need to notice something important about the way Paul wrote the particular list in v.28
 - Paul orders these gifts from most important to least important
 - In the Greek language, the list communicates hierarchy
 - Our English translation reflects this hierarchy when it says God has appointed in the church "first" apostles, "second" prophet, "third" teachers...
 - The words first, second and third imply a hierarchy as does the word "then" before the later items
 - These same words are present in the original Greek as well, which means Paul was listing these gifts in diminishing order of importance
 - The most important gifts are listed at the front of the list, while the least important gifts are at the end of the list
 - Now earlier, Paul taught that every member of the body is important and no member is more important than another
 - So we might wonder if Paul has changed his mind concerning the relative value of each member of the body

- The answer is no
- Where before Paul argued that the value of each member in the body is the same regardless of the type of gift they possess, now he's discussing the relative value of the gifts themselves
 - To borrow from Paul's earlier analogy, while a nose is no less a part of our body than is our eye, nevertheless it's fair to say we rely on our eyes more than we rely on our nose
 - On the other, when I need the services of my nose, no other body part will substitute
 - The nose becomes all important in circumstances when its needed
- Similarly, each person in the church is equally a part of the body and equally able to contribute in his or her own way through their gifting
 - Nevertheless, spiritual gifts vary in their relative impact and importance in the body of Christ
 - Some spiritual gifts are more powerful and more universally beneficial in edifying the body
 - While other spiritual gifts minister on a smaller scale or in more select circumstances
 - But when a particular gift is required to edify the body of Christ, there is no substitute
 - In short, all people in the body are equally important and necessary, but spiritual gifts vary in their capacity to edify the body
- Looking at this list, Paul says the gift of apostleship is the most important gift
 - The gift of apostleship is the most important gift because it was the gift God used to found the church
 - Without this gift, there would be no church and nothing else would matter
 - Second in importance are prophets
 - Prophets are those who deliver God's word to the church

- Without the word of God, the church would remain in the dark concerning God and His purposes in Christ
 - Nothing comes before the word of God in edifying the church
 - Today, these two gifts have ceased operating in the church, because as we explained earlier in this chapter the canon of scripture is closed
 - In Paul's day apostles and prophets were still active, so these gifts were the most important gifts in the body
 - On the other hand, today the highest priority gifting is teaching
 - Teaching is the highest gift today for the same reason that apostles and prophets were important in Paul's day
 - Growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ is the essence of edification
 - And the word of God is the sword of the Spirit to accomplish that work in our hearts
 - The gift of teaching illuminates scripture and brings it to bear on the lives of God's people so that this grow can happen
 - Through teachers, the Holy Spirit makes the Bride of Christ spotless and presentable for the Groom
- From this point, Paul's list continues listing other gifts in diminishing order of importance
 - Remember, this list is not an exhaustive inventory of all gifts
 - Therefore, we know Paul didn't set out to arm us with a definitive rank ordering of spiritual gifts
 - Why bother rank ordering just a sample of gifts then? What's Paul's point?
 - To understand the contrast fully, we need to read to the end of 12

1Cor. 12:29 All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they?

1Cor. 12:30 All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?

1Cor. 12:31 But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.

- Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions concerning the gifts in his list
 - Not all believers are apostles, right?
 - Some believers were certainly gifted and called to be apostles in the church, but not all Christians possessed the gift of apostle
 - Nor could a believer join the ranks of apostles merely because they liked the idea of being an apostle
 - The truth of this statement is self-evident
 - But if this statement is true, then logically the rest of Paul's questions follow as well
 - We have prophets in the church, but not everyone is or can be a prophet
 - We have teachers gifted around us, but not all of us are gifted to teach
 - And by that same token, not everyone in the body will have a gift for miracles or healings or tongues or interpretation of tongues
 - Spiritual gifts are appointed by God, designed for diversity and are nontransferable, nonrefundable and nonreturnable
- Then in v.31 Paul gets to his point in providing a ranked list...he's making a contrast between things that are great and things that are greater
 - And so Paul says earnestly desire the greater gifts
 - The word for earnestly desire is *ze/oo*, which means to zealously seek for something
 - Some might come to this command and assume Paul meant that an individual Christian should seek to acquire one of the spiritual gifts at the top of Paul's list
 - But that can't be Paul's intended meaning, since Paul has already said we can't all have the same gift
 - And the gift we will have is determined by the will of God, not by our earnest seeking
 - The proper interpretation of v.31 hinges on knowing that the phrase in Greek is written in the second person plural

- In Texas, we would say “you all”
- In other words, Paul is speaking about the desires of a congregation, not the personal desire of an individual Christian
- Every congregation should earnest seek for the higher priority gifts over lesser gifts
- Paul means that as a congregation, we should make it our goal to support and encourage those with the higher priority gifts to serve us all the more, while holding the lesser gifts in the proper perspective
 - In any gathering there is only so much time available and that time is precious
 - We should want that time to be used to the greatest possible benefit of the body
 - And while all gifts are important and every believer will have opportunity to serve at one time or another, we need to prioritize
 - Now we understand the point of Paul’s list...the contrast illustrates that some gifts should have priority over others
- And Paul says the priority should favor the apostolic, prophetic and teaching gifts over lesser gifts
 - If the choice is between hearing teaching and seeing miracles, we should seek more to be taught than for someone to do a miracle for us
 - Our flesh will always prefer miracles - just Israel did in the desert
 - But our spirit needs the teaching of God’s word
 - If we have a choice to receive Bible teaching or be healed, we should seek for the teaching over the healing
 - Healing addresses the needs of our flesh in a temporary way
 - Teaching addresses the needs of our spirit in an eternal way
 - And if we have a choice for teaching or to hear someone teach in tongues, then we should seek for the teaching

- While tongues may fascinate us...
- Teaching matures us
- And Paul reminds the church not everyone is an prophet, not everyone is a teacher, etc.
 - Therefore, by necessity we must give some among us a more opportunities to serve if we are to gain the most edification possible
- The tension between giving time to greater gifts instead of lesser gifts is still present in the church today
 - It's no coincidence that churches that place an emphasis on seeking for signs and miracles and dramatic displays of the Spirit often give little attention to in depth Bible teaching
 - God knows that the thing that will draw us closest to Him in a genuine, lasting and meaningful relationship are not the empty emotional displays
 - But an abiding knowledge of Him through His word is the true path to spiritual maturity
 - Paul says seek earnestly for the greater gifts, for the good part, as Jesus called His word:

[Luke 10:41](#) But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things;

[Luke 10:42](#) but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

- Now if you had been a member of the Corinthian church and you were reading Paul's letter, you began to squirm at about this point in his teaching
 - Because you would have recognized that the Corinthian church was practicing spiritual gifts in exactly the wrong way
 - While Paul taught that gifts were assigned by God at the moment of salvation
 - The church thought that gifts could be obtained, either by learning them or asking God for them
 - While Paul taught that God planned for a diversity of gifts

- The Corinthians made it a goal for everyone in the church to obtain the same gift and then use it in unison
 - Like a secret handshake or initiation rite
- And while Paul taught that the use of gifts was for the common good
 - The Corinthians were using gifts to show off and draw attention to themselves - and to create divisions between the “have’s” and the “have not’s”
- And lastly, and most ironic of all, Paul has now taught that the gift of tongues was the least important gift in the body of Christ
 - But the Corinthians had chosen tongues as the gift they valued the most in the body
 - They made it their goal to see the gift of tongues expressed every time the body gathered to the exclusion of other gifts
 - They had turned everything on its head, completely defeating the purpose God intended when He gave them gifts
- How did the Corinthians go so wrong in their understanding of gifts?
 - We can safely assume Paul taught this church the proper perspective on gifts and on tongues when he lived with them
 - Yet somehow, the church had left Paul’s counsel behind and landed in a very bad place
 - They were living in pride and ignorance
 - They took a gift from God intended for the edification of the body and turned it into an opportunity glorify themselves
 - They used gifts to make distinctions that served to divide the body rather than drawing it closer together
 - How did the church go so wrong? They were missing a key ingredient, an essential piece to the puzzle, something that makes a spiritual gift serve its purpose
 - If they tried to use their spiritual gifts without this key ingredient, then the whole recipe falls apart
 - The gifts cease having power to benefit

- And that ingredient is love
- Paul says he wants to show the church a far better way to work as a body

[1Cor. 13:1](#) If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

[1Cor. 13:2](#) If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

[1Cor. 13:3](#) And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

- Paul begins his famous chapter on love by making a series of exaggerated comparison
 - Paul uses four examples of gifts
 - The first example is of tongues
 - Paul began his examples with tongues because the core problem in this church was their abuse of this particular gift
 - In fact, as I said in earlier lesson, the one spiritual gift that Paul includes in every list in this letter is tongues, since that was his central concern in Corinth
 - And in chapter 14 it will become abundantly clear that Paul's central concern in Corinth was their over emphasis on tongues
 - Paul's second example is the gift of prophecy
 - The third example is the gift of giving
 - And the fourth seems to be a gift of martyrdom or perhaps faith
 - Then for each gift, Paul gives an extreme examples of how a gift could be used in the body
 - For example, Paul says even if I had the ability to speak in the language of angels
 - Men do not have such an ability, even those gifted with tongues cannot speak as the angels speak
 - Paul is exaggerating to make his point

- Similarly, Paul exaggerates by saying even if a prophet could know all things, all mysteries, all knowledge
 - Certainly, there is no prophet who possesses all knowledge - apart from Christ Himself
 - Again, Paul's exaggerating
- And even if someone with the gift of giving gave away everything he possessed
- Or if someone with the gift of faith submitted to death
 - Another extreme example
- Nevertheless, these extreme example of spiritual service still fail in the end if they aren't united in love
- Then Paul lists three different ways in which our gifts fail to accomplish their intended purpose when they aren't practiced in love
 - First, Paul says tongues becomes nothing but a senseless noise
 - The gift of tongues is a speaking gift, but without love the speech is useless for its intended purpose of edification
 - It fails to benefit others when used without love
 - The person is just given a useless, offensive noise
 - Secondly, if a prophet doesn't use his gift in love, then that person is nothing
 - Paul emphasizes that we gain no status, no recognition for our gifting if we use it without love for others
 - The Corinthians desired status and recognition
 - But they lacked a loving motive, so they gained no status, neither within the church nor with God
 - Finally, Paul says we will not profit if we try to use our gifts without love for others
 - God assigns us eternal reward in Heaven for our service in our gifting
 - But that reward is contingent on us using our gift in love

- Not in pride, not in spite, not selfishly, but in love
- So love is the missing ingredient that allows our gift to be useful, valuable and profitable
- Love means self-sacrificially using what God has given us to meet the needs of others
 - It means placing their needs before our own
 - And sometimes it means not using our gift if another gift is more appropriate or better suited to a person's needs
 - Sometimes it's more loving to not offer our service to the body if that service would displace a more important gift
 - We'll know when and where to serve by asking what's the best thing for the church, not what's the best thing for me
- But the word love can mean different things to different people, especially in a culture like Corinth where pride, status strength and illegitimate sex were so ingrained in their thinking
 - What does love look like from God's point of view?
 - Paul's eloquent and timeless description of love follows

1Cor. 13:4 Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant,

1Cor. 13:5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered,

1Cor. 13:6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;

1Cor. 13:7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1Cor. 13:8 Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.

1Cor. 13:9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part;

1Cor. 13:10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

- Paul defines agape love as a list of behaviors, some positive and some negative
 - This list is not exhaustive, just as the list of spiritual gifts is not exhaustive
 - There are other aspects to loving our neighbor
 - In fact, that list is probably infinite

- But still, this is a pretty good start to understanding what love looks like
- Love is evident when I'm patient with someone else
 - When they are hurtful or rude to me, I wait for their rudeness to pass without making a point of it
 - When they delay me on the road or cause me inconvenience, I do not hold it against them
 - In terms of using our gifts, patience means waiting for the right time and opportunity to serve
- Love is kind
 - When ever possible, I give a kind word, a thoughtful gesture
 - I smile, I enhance the lives of others and welcome them into my life
 - In my gift, I ensure my service is always beneficial and pleasing to others
- Love is not jealous
 - I don't resent others success or possessions
 - I don't let my lack of contentment become excuse to hurt someone else
 - And I don't compare my gifting with others so as to become jealous of another's gift in place of my own
- Love does not brag
 - Bragging is elevating oneself at the expense of another
 - Bragging only works if it raises my profile while diminishing another's, but it's not loving to do that
 - Instead diminish yourself to elevate another
 - Or at least see to it that everyone rises together
 - And I don't use my gift to show off for others or to make others feel inadequate
- Love isn't arrogant

- Love never wants another person to be offended by our pride
- We want others to be refreshed by our presence
- I don't intimidate or bully others through the use of my gift
 - I don't assume I have a right to use my gift at any time and place of my choosing
- In v.5 Paul says love will not act in an unseemly way, never acting inappropriately
 - When we act in inappropriate ways before others, we embarrass them as we bring shame to ourselves
 - Caring for others means protecting them from the embarrassment that our poor actions create
 - So in love I don't misuse my gift to bring shame to Christ
 - And love does not seek for its own needs first
 - When one piece of pie remains, we offer it to someone else
 - I don't use my gifting for personal gain
 - And when someone else takes that last piece before we could claim it, we're not provoked
 - We can overlook such things
 - We can control our emotions and responses
 - We want the other person to feel as though that piece of pie was our gift to them
 - We don't want to diminish their joy by becoming provoked by them
 - In love, I will always respond to another's use of their gifts with grace and understanding, taking pleasure in their service
 - We don't take any wrong into account
 - Which means we have the worst memory in the world when it comes to others offenses
 - No matter how often or how severely they harm us, we're quick to forgive and forget

- So that we are loving in the way the Father is loving to us
- Therefore, when someone misuses their gift, I will let the offense go
- In vs. 6-7 we are taught that love will never be on the wrong side of the facts
 - We don't celebrate unrighteous actions, unrighteous causes, unrighteous people
 - Instead, love rejoices with the truth
 - We want justice and truth to reign
 - But we can't allow our want for these things to put other aspects of love at risk (like forgiveness and not being provoked)
 - In love, we look for ways to advocate for truth and righteousness without causing offense to those with whom we disagree
 - For the sake of love, we must operate our gifts in accordance with scripture
 - Paul summarizes love as bearing all things, believing all things, hoping for all things and enduring all things
 - What's implied in that verse is "all things for Christ's sake"
 - Christian love bears all that the world brings us for the sake of Christ
 - We believe all that is written in scripture for the sake of Christ
 - We hope for all things promised in God's word for the sake of Christ
 - And we endure all the trials and suffering that may come for the sake of Christ
 - We live as Christ lived so that we can show the world what God's love looks like
 - For Christ's sake, I persevere in the proper use of my gifts
- These qualities of love are the secret ingredient to serving God and His people
 - We simply can't perform works useful to God and ourselves without love
 - That love must be sacrificial and unconditional

- Love must be both our motivation and our goal as we serve in our gifting
 - Our love for God motivates us into action
 - And our goal is to show God's love to others through our service
- But the Corinthians were working from an opposite perspective
 - Love wasn't the motive; pride was the motive
 - And love wasn't the goal; personal achievement and attention was the goal
 - So the church accomplished nothing in the end
- As we leave 13 and enter into 14, Paul's correction steps into high gear