

Corinthians - Paul's Criterion for Evaluating the Gifts of the Spirit

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of love and the priority of prophecy among the gifts of the Spirit, as taught in 1 Corinthians 14.

Duration: 54:53

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 14:1

Topics: "Spiritual Gifts"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of love in the life of a believer. He encourages the audience to prioritize love above all else, stating that without love, everything else is meaningless. However, he also emphasizes that love does not negate the need for spiritual gifts. The speaker urges the church to expect and seek out individuals who are anointed by the Holy Spirit to bring forth a word from God with power and fire. He concludes by highlighting the importance of continually reminding ourselves of these truths and allowing them to shape our lives.

Transcript

Well now, will you kindly turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 14 and two verses 1 to 5 in the chapter that we are going to be browsing over this evening. I make a confession to you, when Greg Scharf and I began this series, it was first of all to be 1 Corinthians chapter 12, because we were very concerned to see the portrait there of the body of Christ, of the glorious unity of the mystical body of Christ, and of the way in which the one life permeates the whole. We were concerned to see for ourselves again, and to be able to proclaim something of the richness of the body, in that it is endowed with so many members and so many parts, and to apply all this to ourselves.

When we came to the end of chapter 12, we really found it impossible to stop there, because chapter 13 was so inviting. And when we came to the end of chapter 13, we found that really it wasn't proper to stop just there. Chapter 14 remained challenging us and inviting us forward.

Well now, that's the way it's happened, and I trust this is indicative of the providence of God, and not simply of our own inclination. Let me read again to you these first five verses from the New International Version. Follow the way of love, and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

For anyone who speaks in a tongue, by the way, the word unknown comes in the King James Version. You notice that it is in italics, *unknown tongue*. That's not in the Greek at all.

Now, I used to be puzzled for many years by that word *unknown*. Well, it's not in the Greek at all, and it needs to be understood. The New International Version and the others are quite right when they leave it out.

Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God. Indeed, no one understands him. He utters mysteries with his spirit.

But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement, and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy.

He who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified. Paul now feels himself in a position to tackle the problem that had apparently risen in Corinth over the practice of the charismatic gifts with which they had been lavished. In a sense, chapters 12 and 13 were but preparatory for what he is now applying to the church.

And here, I think, we have a principle for dealing with problems. The Apostle Paul did not deal with this problem as it were in a vacuum or in the air. He delineated the whole issue and the background to it, and having so done, he now, after two chapters, after two chapters expounding the doctrine of the church and of the relation of the individual member to the whole body and so forth, and then the importance of love, having done that, he now feels that he can look the problem straight in the eye and say what he deems his Lord would have him say concerning it.

That is a principle that we do well to apply when we, too, are faced with problems. Paul has now done that, then. He has stressed the fundamental unity of the body and the diversity of the body and the priority of love.

Now he comes to the issue. Now he comes and he applies the whole thrust of biblical teaching to the problems that have arisen. Now, the first thing I would like you to notice is the general principle that he lays down.

Seems to me that he's approaching it in this way. He lays down a general principle, as he so often does, and then he comes to apply that principle in particular ways, in various ways. Now, the principle laid down is clearly before us in verse one.

The RSV reads like this, *make love your aim and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts especially that you may prophesy*. Our ultimate exposition of this passage may well be construed as an elaboration or application of what is inherent in that comprehensive statement. Now, you notice the first thing stressed is the primacy of love over everything else.

Paul restates something. There is another principle which we encounter in scripture very often. It's the principle of repetition.

All the apostles do it, and our Lord Jesus Christ did it, and I'm quite sure that it is looked upon in scripture as something that is inherent, something that is characteristic of true teaching. We need to be reminded over and over again of the same truths because oftentimes we only hear them with a physical ear, and

they do not penetrate. And even when we grasp them intellectually, they don't still really master and dominate and mold our life and thinking.

So the truth has to be declared over and over again. Now, Paul is repeating himself again here, and I want you to notice it's Paul and it's not me. The first verse then, follow after love, the King James Version, or the RSV, make love your aim, or the New International Version, follow the way of love.

Now, he said that often before in chapter 13. Being what it is, and having the capacity to do what has been expressed in chapter 13, and we're not going to recount that now, love must be given priority. Without love, everything else comes to naught.

With love, the most insignificant things assume a new proportion and a new value. There are new vistas of possibility for every Christian and every church where love rules and has its new place. And love outlasts everything.

The fruit of love and the ministrations of love will meet us in eternity, and love is something that will continue there. Because of what it is, because of what it does then, Paul starts off here. I'm not withdrawing what I said to you in chapter 13, he implies.

But continue to make love your aim, aim at it. And don't let it be a matter of hit or miss. Aim at it, look for it, go out for it, and go after it.

By his command to make love your aim, Paul has in mind a very persistent and determined pursuit of love. I think this is something that we really need to get hold of. I find it very, very challenging.

You know, Paul uses the very word here that he used in in two places at any rate for persecuting the church, the word for persecuting. I persecuted this way unto death, he says in Acts 22 40. I am the least of the apostles and am not meet to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God.

Now it's that very word he used there and was translated persecuted we have right here. Follow after love, persecute after love. Get into the war, get into the battle, fight with anybody and everything in order to get love.

Now I know that sounds contradictory, but the whole point is, you see, it's going to cost, it's going to be an endeavor, it's going to demand something, and he tells us to get into the fray and not to pack up the business, to go on after love. The same word incidentally, and it brings out his meaning I think, the same word is used by him concerning his Zealand dedication as a Christian. In Philippians 3 and verse 12, he uses, it's translated in the RSV as press on.

You remember these words, not that I have already obtained or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own. And you have it again in Philippians 3.14, I press on toward the goal for the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Now you see, there's the notion here of a kind of frenzied zeal, the zeal with which he persecuted the church in the first place in his ignorance, but then the zeal of the enlightened soul of Tarsus now converted for the glory of God seen in Jesus Christ, and there is only one Jesus Christ, and there is only one mediator between God and men, so there is only one Savior, and all must know him if they are to be saved, and therefore the love of Christ constrains me, hedges me in.

And so it's not with a tepid take-it-or-leave-it that he preaches the gospel, a tepid spirit take-it-or-leave-it that he preaches the gospel. There's a zeal, there's a passion, there's a concern here, and he tells us

that's the way you should look out, look for love, and perfect it in your lives. I find this has something to say to my conscience, don't you? Then, secondly, Paul also restates the propriety of desiring spiritual gifts.

First of all, the first thing he repeats is, get on after love. I've said it before, but I'm saying it again. The second thing he repeats is, he restates the propriety of our desiring spiritual gifts, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.

Now, I think this was necessary at the beginning of chapter 14 for this reason. I have heard people, they must be nameless, but I have heard people this side of the Atlantic, um, talk about chapter 13 as if Paul had said something there which negated all the emphasis or importance he had given to the gifts of the Spirit in chapter 12. And the implication, said or unsaid, is this.

Now, when Paul has written chapter 13, it means really that he's written the gifts right off the, right off the program. So, follow after love, okay, but, but now you can forget all about the gifts if you're seeking after love. Do you know that's not what Paul did? And in order to obviate that kind of misunderstanding of chapter 13, he comes back and he repeats what he's already said in chapter 12, and he will have us take it in and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts.

The meaning of this word earnestly is, is really no less intense than the previous verb to which we, we, we refer. It has the thought of a burning zeal at its heart. R. C. H. Lensky, the, uh, Lutheran commentator, has a lovely little comment here.

While Paul emphasizes the fact that love is the supreme need for the purpose, for the proper use of all gifts, he wants love to have gifts that are of effective use in the church. Gifts, he says, are the hands through which love works. Do you know that's very beautiful, and it's very, very true.

Gifts are the hands through which love works. Paul does not summon us in 1 Corinthians 13 to go after love just to have love, period. But having love, then he wants us to have the gifts wherewith we can express love.

Thirdly, Paul stresses the priority of prophecy among the gifts of the Spirit that we are to seek. Now, we are coming nearer the heart of the issue. First one again, make love your aim and earnestly desire spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy, especially that you may prophesy.

Of all the spiritual gifts which we are commanded to seek, this one is held out as the most desirable of all. We are commanded to give it priority. Every Christian church should see to it that the quest for the gift of prophesying should be given priority over the quest for every other gift, second only to our quest for the fruit of the Spirit which is Agatha, which is love.

Now, that's the order. Now, why is this? Whereas the verses following will answer that question more fully, it would be wrong of me to try now at this stage to go ahead and try to expand them before we come to them in due course. The verses following will answer that question more fully then, but it is appropriate that we should say at this stage that prophesying is given such priority because of the very nature of the gift itself.

Of course, we who believe in the finality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, and I trust we all believe that, and we who believe in the propriety of the church closing the canon of Scripture so that there is no new revelation of God that we can ever more receive that is on a par with what the prophets have written and what Jesus Christ has said and his apostles. Nevertheless, nevertheless, there is a gift here which is

spoken of as the gift of prophecy. We do not believe that any man can presume, however, to be a prophet on the same standing or having the same status as the prophets of the Old Testament or the prophets and apostles of the New.

Now, I have searched in many a book and library and whatnot for someone or something that would put this crisply and helpfully. I've come across someone, I have a cutting before me which I think is one of the most helpful, and I will read to you a few excerpts from this. Now, says this writer, a prophet is defined in Jeremiah 23 28 as one who speaks God's words faithfully.

He does not speak out of his own mind or out of his own dreams. He speaks the word of God and he speaks it faithfully. Prophecy is, therefore, the communication to others of a revelation from God.

If this is the basic meaning, we may say that there are at least three kinds or levels of prophecy according to the nature of the divine revelation communicated. Three levels of prophecy. Now, the first is this.

He speaks of it as direct and general. By that he means this. This is the first kind of prophecy.

It comes by direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit directly communicating with an individual, and what he tells that individual applies to everybody everywhere and for all time. General truth, universal truth, communicated by the Spirit of God directly to an individual who, having received the revelation, is inspired of the same Spirit to inscribe it into holy written so that we have our Bible. Now, as the writer goes on to say, and as I indicated before referring to him, this is how we would describe the prophets of the Old and the New Testaments.

They received their word from God and the teaching of the apostles, the teaching of the word of God, the canon of scripture, applies to everybody everywhere. And in that sense, we don't have prophets today. However inspired a preacher may be or however inspired or learned a teacher may be, you don't say, because he spoke so well, we must add that to the canon of the scripture and we must have an enlarged Bible.

You don't say that. A man may speak prophetically, but you do not add what he says to the canon of holy writ. He is not on a par with the writers of the Old Testament or the New.

He is on a different level. He may be called a prophet, but in a secondary sense. How in a secondary sense? Well, now looking back in the Old Testament, you find, for example, that sometimes, or let me be more specific, we may say that a second kind of prophecy is direct but particular.

By that, this writer to whom I'm referring means this. God sometimes speaks directly to an individual and wants to communicate something through him to someone in particular. It only means something to that particular person to no one else.

Now the illustration of that, atypical illustration of that, would be in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, where you have a prophet called Agabus. He features in chapter 11 and he features in chapter 21. And on both occasions, he says of something that is going to happen, something specific.

In chapter 11, for example, he speaks and foretells a great famine which was, which took place in the days of Claudius Caesar. And he was given the understanding from God and the foreknowledge from God that this was coming to pass and he declared it. In chapter 21, verses 10 and 11, he foretold the arrest and the imprisonment of the Apostle Paul by the Jews in Jerusalem.

Now these prophecies were direct in that Agabus spoke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but they were particular in their reference to a certain famine and to Paul's imprisonment and arrest. They've got nothing to do with me, or you, in a sense. There is a third sense in which we may speak of prophecy.

There is prophecy in which the revelation, although general in its application to people, is yet indirect in its origin. Now, how can I get this across? It is, it is general in its application, it applies to everybody, but it is indirect in its origin. The writer goes on to say it is in this secondary and derived sense that a preacher may sometimes be called a prophet.

What he says may be universally true and apply to everyone. It may have a general application, but he does not speak under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He speaks, that is, not under the direct inspiration of the Spirit in the sense in which the prophets and the apostles of the Bible did.

He is inspired by the Word of God, and he preaches within the confines of that which is revealed in the Word of God, but it's the Spirit of God that enables him to do that. Now, in this last sense, or in the second sense, we still have prophets in the Church. Some put an emphasis on the one, some put an emphasis on the other.

I've been looking up, for example, what, to see what some of the commentators say about prophecy, and I'll give you just one or two illustrations. Hodge says that the gift of prophecy as the organ of the, the gift of prophecy as the organ of the Spirit, in a manner adopted to instruct and edify the Church, that's what prophecy is. It is a gift of God adapted to edify the Church.

Another contemporary author this time says prophecy is exhortation and exposition of Christian truth. Leon Morris says it denotes something rather like our preaching, but is not identical with it. It is not the delivery of a carefully prepared sermon, but the uttering of words directly inspired by God.

Calvin, on the other hand, in a comment on 1 Thessalonians 5 and 20, refers to 1 Corinthians 14, 3, and to prophecy there mentioned, and he speaks of it in these terms, as the science of the interpretation of Scripture. Let us understand prophesying to mean the interpretation of Scripture applied to present need. Now, where do we come to? What is prophecy in this context? Well, it would seem, if I dare to sum up, it would dare, it appears to mean something like this, that God by the Spirit does come to what some writers speak of as Church prophets, prophets acting within a given situation, within a given congregation, and He communicates to them a particular word for a particular moment.

And insofar as the Church is prepared to accept that as a prophetic utterance from God, that Church will live and learn that it was His very word for the hour. Sometimes it can be part and parcel of Christian preaching, or ought to be. And the preacher may be quite unconscious of it, but the Word of God lays hold upon something that he says that he's meditated upon, or perhaps without meditation, premeditation, and it becomes a veritable light in the darkness.

And so it is a prophetic Word of God. Now, then, that is the principle in general. That's the general principle that is set before us.

Shall I repeat it to you? Follow the way of love, eagerly desire spiritual gifts, but especially the gift of prophecy. Now, the general principle justified, verses two to five. In proceeding to justify the principle enunciated in the first verse, Paul confines himself to a consideration of the respective merits of prophesying on the one hand and tongue speaking on the other, or glossolalia as we speak of it.

He handles the issue as something very delicate. He's aware of feelings there in Corinth on the one side or the other, and he treads very delicately here. It will be evident as we proceed that Paul is here addressing the church as such, not individuals so much as the church as a body, with reference to its public worship and its ministry, and not individual Christians with reference to their private and their personal devotions.

I think this point is important. We shall see it in a moment again. Paul is not addressing individuals about what they do privately.

He's addressing the church as a body. He was church conscious, and this is something that has to do with a church as a body and not simply with individuals. Now, what has he got to say? Well, now, the first thing I would like you to notice is this.

He says that tongues are of less value than prophecy because tongues are addressed to God, whereas prophesying is a manward discipline. Now, when I wrote that down, I said to myself, that's a blunder, I've made a mess there. And probably you thought the same as you heard me saying it, but it's not a blunder at all.

This is exactly what Paul said. Let me repeat. Firstly, tongues are addressed to God, whereas prophesying is a manward discipline.

It is something addressed to man, and therefore it is more important on that account. But you say, surely that can't be right. Well, before we come to that, listen to verses 2 and 3. For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men, but to God.

That's the speaker in tongue. For no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the spirit. On the other hand, he who prophesies speaks to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

And the conclusion of that is, therefore, the person who speaks to men does a more important job than the man who speaks to God. Now, you will notice the contrast there to God standing over against two men. And as far as Paul is yet concerned, what people are doing for men or to men is more important than what they do to God.

You say, I can't, I can't take that in. Surely God is more important than men. Of course he is.

Paul has not blundered at all. What is Godward is more surely important, you say, than what is manward. Well, now it depends what you mean.

The point of the contrast between the Godward and the manward exercise of these two gifts, and his stressing the priority of prophecy because it is manward, serves to show that Paul is not attempting to assess the intrinsic value of each gift, but that he has one particular criterion of judgment in mind, and what is that? I wonder how many of you have noticed it as you've read this passage through in preparation for the service tonight. Well, let me give you, I wonder how many of you have noticed it as you've read this passage through in preparation for the service tonight. Well, let me give you the key.

He's assessing these two gifts on the basis of one criterion, and he assumes that that one criterion is sufficiently important to say categorically that prophecy is more important than tongues. What is it? Well, it's the question of the edification of the church. Six times over does the Apostle Paul refer to the edification of the church, and he makes it beyond any reasonable doubt that this is the basis upon which

he assesses prophesying to be far more important than speaking in tongues.

Its capacity for the edification of the people of God is that much greater. Now, in case you are not taking my word as gospel, I'd like you to look up whatever transmission you have and follow me in verse 13, sorry, verse 3. He who prophesies speaks to men for their up-building. Now, that's the word for edification.

It's one word, and I'm going to quote it six times to you. In verse 3, for their up-building, it says, then in verse 4, he who speaks in a tongue edifies himself. It's the same word.

Then in verse 5, he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues unless someone interprets so that the church may be edified. Then again in verse 12, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church. It's the same word exactly, to edify the church.

Then in verse 17, for you may give thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. And then in verse 26, what then, brethren, when you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification.

Now, Paul, why do you say that this gift of prophecy is more important than the gift of tongues? Is it because you know nothing about tongues in your experience and you despise it? A thousand times, no, I speak more in tongues than you all, he says. Well, why then for this reason? Because it is a gift that helps to build up the church, whereas the gift of tongues can't do it in the same way. On the basis of its capacity to edify, then, the gift of prophecy is more to be prized.

It is particularly orientated to this end. Now, let's look at some of these statements in verses two and three in a little more detail, only a little more detail. He says tongues are addressed to God.

Man does not understand what's going on when another speaks in tongues. The sound he can hear, of course, but the sense of the substance is unknown to him, for it is a total mystery. Only by the employment of a second gift, that of interpretation, can he even understand what is said.

Now, this looks as if we have here, this is by the way, but I think it is important. It does look as if we have here a different type of tongue speaking from what you have in Acts chapter two, where no interpreter or translator was necessary, because the entire crowd there assembled heard and understood the apostles speaking in their own respective languages the wonderful works of God. They knew what the apostles were saying.

The apostles had never learned those languages, but they were able to communicate the marvelous works of God, and the folk from different parts there represented understood them in their own languages. This is different. There in the book of the Acts, the tongues were addressed to man.

Here in 1 Corinthians, tongues are addressed to God. That's Paul's whole point. No human being understands the language of the tongue speaker as envisaged in Corinthians.

He is speaking mysteries in the Spirit, yet God understands him, and there are groanings which cannot be uttered, which are interpreted on the throne of God as praise and prayer or whatever. Tongues, then, are addressed to God. Prophecies are addressed to man.

As we've already noted, the whole thrust of prophecy is manward, and it has its avowed aim the edification, the exhortation or encouragement and consolation of men. Now, there are three words used

here. Let me just have one brief look at them.

The first is translated upbuilding in the New International Version. It's the word edification in the King James, but this is what it means literally, building up. There's the thought of a house being built.

It takes us to the building industry, and really it's something added to the house, something to strengthen the house, a buttress or something of that kind, so that the house is being built. It's used metaphorically, of course. Prophecy, then, prophecy properly understood and properly exercised buttresses the church.

It builds the church up. It makes the church stronger. It makes the congregation stronger, and those who practice it do something for the church that needs to be done in every community.

Upbuilding. Look at the next one, encouragement. Now, I tell you that that word encouragement in the NIV is a translation of the word from which we have our English paraclete.

You will understand what it means. It's the word paraclesis. You remember how Jesus introduced the Holy Spirit to his disciples in John 14 to 16.

He introduced the coming one to his disciples as the paraclete that would come. A paraclete is one who takes his place alongside of others to comfort them. To strengthen them and to represent them in a court of law if they were involved in any trouble.

The advocate. Now, says the Apostle Paul, there is something about this gift of prophecy so that it has this quality of help and assistance for the church. It comes alongside the church, and it acts as a strengthening, encouraging power.

It's God arguing with the church and arguing for the church, and the church knows that God has come down alongside of it to speak with it if not to it. Then the other word that remains here is the word consolation. It's a beautiful one.

It's the one used in John 11, 19, and 31 to describe how the Jews comforted Martha and Mary at the death of Lazarus. You see, you're in a very moving situation here. They've lost their only brother, and the friends come in, and the neighbors come in, and they comforted Martha and Mary after losing their only brother.

And here it is. Prophecy has this comforting quality. It comes to us in a moment of anguish, and it pacifies our fears.

Tongues are thus addressed Godward in praise and in prayer, whereas prophecy is a manward ministry which has a person's spiritual well-being and up-building as its aim. As such, it ought to be given priority over every gift in public worship other than the pursuit of love. This is not to put man's good before God's glory far, far from it, but rather to secure more worship and more service that will ultimately glorify God.

To secure that ultimate end, we may have to aim at intermediate ends in the meantime. Men must be edified. Men must be encouraged.

Men must be comforted before they will honor and glorify God in their lives and in their service. This ministry does that in part. Another thing I want to say, and I'm drawing towards a close, is that the general kind of edification gained from tongues is personal to the speaker himself, whereas that derived from prophesying benefits the whole church.

Now, this is the second stress. The first stress was this. Prophecy edifies the church, not just an individual.

We are so individually minded that really we're out of focus. I've got to have the blessing. I've got to have this and that for myself, never mind about other people.

That's how we are, you know. We're terribly selfish even in our supposed spiritual life, whereas really the way we should be thinking is this. Does it profit the body? Does it profit the family? What's it like for the family? If it's not good for the family, then I ought to abstain from it, even as I would abstain from drink.

It may be a lovely gift for me personally, but if it doesn't help the family, it's not all that value. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself. No question about that in Paul's mind.

But he who prophesies edifies the church. Now, I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. Now, briefly, the tongue speaker edifies himself.

Paul does not question the personal value of this gift to the individual who has it, provided it is the genuine gift imparted by the Holy Spirit and not something that is psychologically concocted or something that is satanically endowed and there is a counterfeit of Satan for everything that the Spirit of God gives us. Provided that it is the gift of the Spirit of God, and there's no question about that, then there is profit to the individual concerned. Everybody may doubt him.

Everybody may be cross with him, but he himself would be ministered if he has the gift of the Spirit. If Paul were pressed further and asked to evaluate the quality of that edification, then, in the light of later verses, he would want to add a rider here. But I'm not going to do that now.

You read verses 13 to 15 when you have time, and you will see that there are grades of edification. The second thing I want to say about this is this. Whereas the tongue speaker edifies himself, he who prophesies edifies the Church.

It's the same stress once again. Clearly, that which edifies the Church is of greater value than that which simply edifies one person, if the quality of the edification be the same in both cases. This Church consciousness, then, is something which we painfully miss and should earnestly look for in our day and age.

Then, I must say this, too. Verse 5 remains. Whereas Paul says he would wish the entire Corinthian Church spoke in tongues, a further tacit acknowledgement that they did not then do so, he would nevertheless prefer that they prophesied.

I would that you all spoke with tongues, said Paul. You see, Paul is here battling on two fronts, as it were. He's in a difficult situation, pastorally.

He is at one and the same time concerned to give glossolalia its due place as a gift of the Spirit, whilst he feels he must also condemn the overestimation of its value by the Corinthians. The Corinthians have just gone crazy on tongues. Tongues is everything.

And the Apostle has got to correct that, but he wants to correct that without, for one moment, casting a cloud over the value of the gift itself, provided it is the gift of God and it is practiced as God meant it to be practiced. This is why with one breath, you see, he speaks highly and appreciatively of the gift of tongues, whilst with the next breath he proceeds to appear, at any rate, to show that it is an inferior one, and

particularly inferior to prophecy. We must not, therefore, build too much upon Paul's statement that he wishes that all spoke with tongues.

Don't build too much on that. He uses the very same expression elsewhere to indicate that he wishes that all men were unmarried. You remember that, don't you? I would, he says, that all men were even as I myself.

But then he goes on, but each has his proper gift, and the word is charisma, of God, one after this manner and another after that manner. The Apostle is not quarreling with God's ordination of marriage. He's not quarreling with God's plan there and God's purpose, but as one who had learned to be happy and contented with his own personal lot, he expressed the wish that all others shared in it.

He is not, however, seriously setting his personal desire over against God's will in the matter, for he proceeds immediately afterwards to say, one has this gift and another has that gift. One has the gift, the charisma. It's a charismatic gift to be a celibate.

It's the gift of the Spirit of God. And the other has the charisma, a charismatic gift, which is the capacity to live the married life. You know, the charismatic gifts are very wide.

They're much wider than merely speaking in tongues and prophecy. And the gift of celibacy is a gift of the Spirit. Everybody can't take it.

Everybody can't even hear it, says our Lord. They can't listen to it. But those who are called and have the gift.

Clearly, then, Paul expresses himself similarly concerning the gift of the Spirit and of prophecy, the gifts of the Spirit, prophecy, and tongues. As one endowed with a gift of tongues and who employed it more liberally than many others, from chapter 14, verses 18 and 19, he would wish that all shared in it. But this must be seen against the background of the already acknowledged sovereignty of God in dispensing the gifts severally as he wills, chapter 12, verse 4, and in other places.

And in the light of his reiterated reference to the primacy of prophecy over tongues, we see that Paul clearly wants us to see that prophecy is the gift he would have us covet. Now, my friends, we draw to a close. What's all this got to say to us? Well, it certainly has this to say to us, that we should be prayerfully expecting in the Church of Jesus Christ to have men who are clearly under the anointing of the Spirit.

Not simply to expound the word of God in an orderly way from week to week in the pulpit and in our Sunday school classes and where our groups meet. We need that. That is our basic diet.

But alongside of that, whether it be the preacher in the pulpit or whether it be the teacher with his class, whoever it may be, someone who is open to the Spirit of God to come and take him up and have a word from God that has the fire of heaven in it for that moment and that hour. And it is a, thus saith the Lord for the hour. As far as I can see it then, the pattern is clear.

Aim for love in the first place. Without love, everything equals nothing. But love doesn't dispense with the gifts of the Spirit.

Having agape, flooding our hearts, the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us day after day, being filled with Spirit. What then? Oh, let us be open to the God of all grace that

he should give us all the gifts he sees us to need in order that we should be capacitated to do his will and his work in a world that so desperately needs the functioning of every limb in the body. You know there are members in the Church of Jesus Christ and the only thing they can do is criticize.

They've never started to work really to build the Kingdom of God. Now this is sad, this is sad, but we have them. There is no constructive conversion of work of men and women as far as they're concerned.

It's looking around with an eye to criticize, either doctrinally or ecclesiastically or, well, whatever. The view of the Church that comes out in the New Testament, and especially in these Pauline epistles, is that of the body of Christ, and he is the head, and the body is the means whereby the head does his sovereign work in the world. Oh, to manifest before an unbelieving world that we have union, life union, with him who is risen and ascended on high, and that because of that, though we may be very simple and very ordinary, we have our gifts, and we are prepared to use them to the glory of God, with love for one another.

They may not be very important in the sight of others, but we have them, and insofar as we are seeking them, let us seek first of all the gifts that will bring the greatest good and benefit to the whole community, especially building others up with ourselves. And the top of the list, says the Apostle Paul, right on the top, next to Agape, as the fruit of the Spirit, there should be this prophecy. May the Spirit of God lay hold upon us afresh, and make us the kind of believing community he would have us be during these momentous days through which it is our privilege and responsibility to live.

Let us pray. Oh, Heavenly Father, forgive us, forgive us for our many sins and transgressions. Forgive us, forgive us, we pray, for splitting up our lives so oftentimes into various departments, and we live the spiritual life simply in our heads.

It's all a matter of ideas, and we juggle with ideas, but we never grapple with the realities of the spiritual world. We beat the air, as Paul says. Mighty God, endow the body of Christ once again, your people, with such gifts as are necessary for us.

We ask for nothing else, but such gifts as are necessary for us to be and to do what you require of us, as those whom you have redeemed with the precious blood of the cross. Tenderly lead us, then. Mercifully protect us.

Sovereignly, sovereignly guard us. And we shall, at the end of the journey, ascribe to yourself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit alone, the everlasting glory and the everlasting praise. Amen.

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