

The Glorious Body of Christ: The Place of Love

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:3

31 But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

13 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Introduction: A Word About Spiritual Gifts and the problem of verse 31

According to 12:7 spiritual gifts are manifestations of the Holy Spirit given by God to each member of the church for the common good of the whole body.

16ish Spiritual Gifts listed in the Bible: Romans 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12; 1 Peter 4:10-11

Leadership: encouraging and helping others to build the kingdom of God ([Romans 12:8](#) NIV)

Administration: helping with long term goals and remaining on task ([1 Cor. 12:28](#) NIV)

Teaching: instructing in truths and doctrines of God's Word

Knowledge: teaching and discipleship. The ability to learn, know and explain God's Word

Wisdom: the ability to discern works of the Holy Spirit and apply teaching and actions

Prophecy: proclaiming the Word of God with boldness ([Romans 12:6](#) NIV)

Discernment: being able to recognize the truth about a situation

Exhortation: people with this gift are enthusiastic about the Lord and they can motivate others

Shepherding: looking out for the spiritual welfare of others

Faith: trusting God to fulfill His plan. People with this gift are encouragers

Evangelism: the building up of the church so others will be led to Christ

Apostleship: motivators, church planters, missionaries: people who look beyond the walls

Service/Helps: helping those in need of practical assistance ([Romans 12:7](#) NIV)

Mercy: The person with this gift shows acts of compassion

Giving: People with this gift will give freely and with joy to further His kingdom

Hospitality: Making people feel welcome, appreciated, and wanted ([1 Peter 4:9](#) NIV)

The questions we are all asking are:

- Have they or have they not ceased? Have some of them ceased and others remain?
- How do I know what my spiritual gift is?
- Can we have more than one spiritual gift?

- Whatever our spiritual gift may be, should we expect it to be temporary or permanent?
- Will it be supernatural or ordinary when we use spiritual gifts?
- How do talents and abilities relate to spiritual gifts?
- What does a church look like when everyone uses their spiritual gifts?

There is no way I can give you comprehensive and definite answers to all of these questions. What I can do and what I would like to attempt to do is give you the best answers to these questions I can, according to what I have studied in the Scriptures. But remember, just because they are based on my studies of the scriptures do not make my answers infallible. The scriptures are infallible so I will attempt to answer with as much scripture as possible. The reason I want to venture into this danger zone is because I strongly believe that a church who pursues the spiritual gifts with the right heart and according to the truth of the scriptures is a church that will be blessed beyond measure.

- Which gifts have ceased? The argument from 13:8-12 is not a solid biblical argument for cessationism. Chapter 1 verse 7 ruins that argument. It's hard to give a definitive answer but I would encourage you to ask yourself what the purpose for each gift is. If we have no need of the purpose we should have no need of the gift. For example, I believe that revelatory prophecy has ceased. We now have the fullness of God's revelation and there's no need for that type of prophecy.
- How do I know what my spiritual gift is? Earnestly desire the gift you're most interested in and drawn toward and pray, pray, pray, pray. Do not be afraid to try to use the gifts. Always compare your thoughts and actions to the Scriptures, pray, and trust your pastor's counsel.
- Can we have more than one spiritual gift? I think so. I have never found a biblical reason to say no.

- Whatever our spiritual gift may be, should we expect it to be temporary or permanent? I believe that 1 Corinthians 12:27-31 would indicate the possibility of both. There are offices listed there which, are referred to as gifts from God in Ephesians 4:11, and there are temporary gifts listed there as well.
- Will it be supernatural or ordinary when we use spiritual gifts? I believe that depends on the nature of the gift itself. Clearly a gift of healing will appear a bit more supernatural than the gift of helping. However, I strongly believe that the measure of a spiritual gift is its spiritual impact and not the act itself. For example, a person exercising their simple gift of helping that results in the edification of the body is just as supernatural and majestic as a person that cures a person with cancer with the same result.
- How do talents and abilities relate to spiritual gifts? Talents and abilities alone are not spiritual gifts. Please see previous answer. What separates a spiritual gift from a talent or ability is the spiritual impact.
- What does a church look like when everyone uses their spiritual gifts? God-glorifying, Christ-exalting, mission-accomplishing, and powerful.

The problem in verse 31 ***But earnestly desire the higher gifts.*** If we have been interpreting everything correctly up to this point, we have determined that Paul is encouraging the Corinthians to see each other and the spiritual gifts as equally important. It also seems that he has encouraged them to be content with their spiritual gift because God is the one who chooses the gifts for us. It seems counterproductive to end this discussion by saying, ***earnestly desire the higher gifts.*** Can literally be translated *covet the best gifts*. Seems as though this would lead to the very problem they were having, coveting one another's gifts and creating a hierarchy for the spiritual gifts.

I will pose 3 possible interpretations. Two wrong ones and mine :)

The first is that this is not properly translated in nearly every English translation of the Bible. That idea is based on the fact that Paul has encouraged the Corinthians to stop classifying the gifts according to some hierarchy and be content with the gifts that God has given them. He has explicitly said not to be seeking after other people's gifts out of jealousy or selfish ambition. If all of that is true why would he contradicts himself by saying earnestly desire the higher gifts?

The explanation posed by John MacArthur is that this verse is mistranslated. The Greek word ZELOO, translated earnestly desire, does not specify whether it is indicative or imperative. Indicative meaning a statement of fact and imperative meaning a statement of command. English translations have obviously translated it as imperative. However, it is the context that should determine which way you choose to translate it. According to John MacArthur, the context would indicate that it should be indicative. That would mean it should be translated, "***but you earnestly desire the higher gifts.***" Are only to English translations I found that take this approach. The Message Bible translation says, ***And yet some of you keep competing for so-called "important" parts.*** And, God's Word translation says, ***You [only] want the better gifts.***

The second option would be that Paul is encouraging them to earnestly desire the higher gifts but to do it with the right thinking as we have discussed today. He could be encouraging them to earnestly desire the more prominent gifts but do so remembering God's way of thinking. All gifts are equally important and every member is indispensable. Conforming your thinking to God will help you in using the gifts properly but the more excellent way is to do everything out of love. Sounds like a great ending to my sermon last week, which it was, but I have since grown in my understanding of this verse.

Third option is that Paul is not speaking to individuals at all. Paul is speaking to the Corinthians as a church body. As a body they are to seek after and celebrate whatever gifts are more important for their context. Let me explain. First, what I mean by Paul speaking to the

body is that he is not encouraging individuals to covet other spiritual gifts. But, he is encouraging the whole church to honor those who have the more important gifts for their context. In the Corinthian church the gift of prophecy was clearly one of, if not the most important gift at that time. There were people in the church with the gift of receiving and speaking the oracles of God. If someone stood here this morning and claimed to have that gift we would be forced to ask them to remain silent or leave. The reason that we do not accept that form of prophecy today is because we have all of the oracles of God recorded in the Scriptures. So, my point is, the importance of spiritual gifts can vary by time, cultures, and circumstances.

We cannot get too hung up on this discussion because immediately says there is a more excellent way understanding spiritual gifts.

Of course, we know the more excellent way is the way of love. So, why did Paul not start here? The reason is because love is the single most difficult thing to properly understand for human beings. We cannot use the word *love* ambiguously. There is no other word in the human language that is more powerful and it must be defined with great precision. The problem is, it is impossible to define. Dictionary define it as, and *intense feeling of deep affection*. That falls way short.

John says that “God is love” so can you give a definition of God? It is much like the Trinity, the harder you try to give it a definition the greater the risk of falling into heresy and error. God does not even give it a definition in the Bible, he gives it descriptions. Pastor Reggie will be preaching on many of those descriptions over the next couple of weeks from first Corinthians 13. One of the things he will most likely point out is that every word used to describe love is a verb. Love is not a warm fuzzy feeling, love is action.

And now, our main text. I'm going to quickly exposit the text and then say three short things about it. We are simply building a launching pad for the fireworks that will be unleashed over the next few weeks from the rest of this chapter. We're going to look at the preeminence of love, the power of love, and the purpose of love.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, (I do not believe Paul is being sarcastic here in referring to their pagan ritual of speaking gibberish. I believe Paul is saying that both forms of tongues exist as spiritual gifts) ***but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*** (In the Greek this means...)
2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. (Paul is using legit gifts with a touch of hyperbole to get his point across)
3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (Even martyrdom is of no value without love).

1. The Preeminence of Love

- The context is love for and within the body of Christ. Not wedding vows.
- Love is more important than the spiritual gifts themselves because without love they are useless. The question is, the spiritual gifts even exist when there is not loving the believer?

2. The Power of Love

- the efficacy of a spiritual gift is dependent upon the motivation of the gifted believer. That motivation must be a love for the body of Christ. And, a love for the body of Christ must be motivated by a love for Christ himself. Remember Jesus is conversation with Peter (Jn. 21:15-19).

3. The Purpose of Love

- The purpose for our love is to build up the body of Christ and fuel the great commission all for the glory of God.

Closing

John Calvin says in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:27, *“Whatever, therefore, any one of us has, let him know that it has been given him for the edification of his brethren in common; and let him, accordingly, bring it forward, and not keep it back-buried, as it were, within himself, or make use of it as his own. Let not the man, who is endowed with superior gifts, be puffed up with pride, and despise others; but let him consider that there is nothing so diminutive as to be of no use- as, in truth, even the least among the pious brings forth fruit, according to his slender capacity, so that there is no useless member in the church. Let not those who are not endowed with so much honor, envy those above them, or refuse to do their duty to them, but let them maintain the station in which they have been placed. Let there be mutual affection, mutual fellow – feeling, mutual concern. Let us have a regard to the common advantage, in order that we may not destroy the church by malignity, or envy, or pride, or any disagreement; but, on the contrary, everyone of us, strive to the utmost of his power to preserve it.*

- Brothers and sisters, our love is demonstrated through communion.
- To anyone listening who is outside of the body of Christ I want to quickly share the gospel of salvation that you may enter through faith in Christ.

CG Discussion Questions

1. Can you give a brief definition of spiritual gifts from memory?
2. After having spiritual gifts listed out and briefly described, does that help you in the pursuit of finding your spiritual gifts?
3. Were there any particular questions we addressed regarding the spiritual gifts that you found to be particularly interesting?
4. In your own words, can you describe what Christian love should look like within the body of Christ?
5. What is the twofold purpose for our love within the church, and what is the ultimate aim love?
6. What is the primary motivation for our love for one another?
7. How does the Lord's Supper reflect our love for one another?