



7. A Passion for Gifts 3 (1 Cor 13:8-14:28)

Over the last couple of sermons we have explored the truth of scripture that God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – gives us gifts according to His grace and not our merits. The purpose of those spiritual gifts – which are spiritually imparted – are that we are able to serve God, serve one another and serve the lost. They allow us to take our role and function as part of the body of Christ. They are essentially tools; and the thing about tools is unfortunately that they can be misused as well as used.

I first started looking at the passage today in the way that most do – by exploring how the misuse of gifts occurred in the Corinthian church and how we could learn from it. We could easily have got waylaid and had a long discourse on the subject of tongues.

But having told us about the nature of gifts in 1 Corinthians, Paul launches into one of the most profound chapters in scripture – chapter 13 before going on to the bit about tongues and prophecy. Of course it's no coincidence. Right at the heart of all the problems in the church at Corinth was the attitude brought on by their flirtation with the world. Corinth was a divisive church. It had theological splits “I am of Paul, I am of Apollos”, people preferred to communicate through their solicitors, there was marital infidelity, there was a flirtation with idolatry, there was prejudice against the poor, the people reflected the fads and fancies of the world and there was a basic disrespect for the things of God.

What a disaster! And to top it all, the people thought that they were so “spiritual” that they freely exercised the gifts of the Spirit in the church. That was the half of it. We looked last year at chapter 11 and we saw the farrago which was the celebration of the Lord's supper – such was the disobedience that many were facing the judgement of sickness and death:

11: 28 A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31 But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. 32 When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.

Wow! Here were people in rebellion before God and their fellow believers, and they are trying to exercise spiritual gifts. And people were dying because of their abominable behaviour. What was happening?

Let's look at my jigsaw. This is a fantastic piece of equipment in the hands of an expert. In the hands of a child it's dangerous. Apart from damaging what they are trying to cut – what damage are they going to do themselves? It was one thing to be disobedient; but using the powerful gifts of the Spirit of God wrongly was destructive and divisive.

Paul had to correct people who had taken something good and designed to be used in the Spirit, and who were using it for their self-indulgence and probably their self-glorification. They had taken the spiritual and used it in the flesh. Paul said in 1 Cor 12:7 *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.* They are given for the common good.

What if they are used to edify oneself? One of the worst examples of this was in the Corinthians' use of tongues. Paul said – desire the greatest gifts – so they desired tongues. Why? Well, why does anyone desire tongues? Sounds impressive doesn't it? It looks and sounds kinda spiritual. It brings an extra dimension to worship – more for the person who speaks the tongue than the rest.

And that was the issue. Gifts are this - *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.* Where's the common good when you can't understand a word of what's going on? There's no doubt that whatever gift you have, you can get a lot of self-satisfaction from doing it. It gives you a warm feeling to know you've helped someone, whether that's practical or pastoral. Or for seeing success in leadership. What about that boost in faith as you see someone healed or see

some other miraculous sign. You can see why some of the Corinthians were enjoying the fact that they could speak in tongues – it was very edifying – to them personally! But *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.* Where is the common good in edifying yourself? That's never been what spiritual gifts are about.

That's why Paul said 14: 3 *everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort.* 4 *He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.* That's not unless of course that the tongue is interpreted. The whole idea of meeting together is to edify one another not oneself. It was simply a case of using the tool correctly.

But my purpose this morning was not essentially about tongues and prophecy in particular. It's about the right use of gifts. In the first of our mini-series as part of our overall subject of Heart of service I dealt with the fact that God has given us gifts to use for His service – the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. Gifts are given by the grace of God and not by human achievement, or by reaching a spiritual level. They are available to each believer now. In our second session we saw what the gifts were and how we are enabled by the Spirit to play our part in the body of Christ – and that a much bigger repertoire of gifts exist than we currently use!

But what's the point of having any of them if we do not behave with the right spirit. However impressive some of these gifts might sound, they will be a disaster if used incorrectly. Look at Corinth. They had the lot – healing, miracles, prophecy, tongues – but a fat lot of good any of them really were when handled by an unloving and divisive fellowship. In fact, they were appallingly destructive! They had the gifts – and exercised all of them- and they were as good as a church that didn't! And that's an observation you won't have much trouble finding the same true of today. An unloving uncaring charismatic or pentecostal church is about as dead as one that is unloving and uncaring old fashioned traditional non-charismatic church. There's no difference.

However, any fellowship that discovers and uses the gifts that the Spirit gives with the right heart finds that the tools do the job extremely well – people come to Christ and mature into men and women of God.

The issue is, how do we become skilled users of the gifts that the Spirit has given us. Of course the answer is in that profound chapter 13. It makes sense of most of 1 Corinthians for us.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

It doesn't matter how amazing the gift you might have is, if you don't have love then quite frankly, you're a waste of space: a dangerous waste of space. What is love? It's back to repeating myself – but this is the Word of God and it's critical to us. Love in the NT is the Greek agape – a self sacrificing love where we place the needs of others before our needs – to the point of our own death.

1 John 4:10 In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ESV

Rom 5:6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die-- 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ESV

I've preached on Romans 13 before and I daresay I said much the same thing – I didn't look back. As we look at these verses we see what our personal characteristic should be like as we read these verses back. Put your name in where I've put mine:

Mark is patient, Mark is kind. he does not envy, he does not boast, he is not proud. 5 he is not rude, he is not self-seeking, he is not easily angered, he keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Mark does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 he always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Mark never fails.

Paul's message to the Corinthians in their orgy of self-furtherance and all the problems it brought was - "It's time to grow up and stop behaving like children". However fascinating you may find the idea of having gifts, they are only tools to further the purposes of God. Here's the words:

11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. 12 Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Our process as believers is to grow and reach maturity. Ultimate maturity is reached at that time when I shall know fully as I am known. Let's grow and mature. And growth isn't evidenced in what gifts we exercise, or how knowledgeable we are, what roles we have in the church, or by how personally stable or responsible we are. What is Paul saying we should do

★ Invest in what lasts

We used to have a plaque in our kitchen it says "**Marry a good cook. Kissing don't last, but cooking do.**" There is a simple message in this passage. *13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.* If you want to find out where the ultimate core of what being a Christian is then it is surrounding these three words. Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. Hope is that innate certainty of what God has promised us. Love is being like Jesus. The greatest is love. What do you most want to be and do as a Christian? I'm sure there were many in Corinth who wanted the buzz of speaking in tongues, or having the gift of healing. Maybe they desired to be a teacher or leader. Or follow Paul's advice and prophesy. But what does Paul say: *But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.* They will all go. They are temporal. Invest in what will last – desire to be like Jesus because that's one gift the Father, Son and Spirit happily impart.

★ Make love the task you use your tools for

Gifts are important and I urge you to take advantage of what God graciously offers you. But chapter 13 exists here because gifts are to be used in love. We serve one another because we love one another and we use the gifts God has placed at our disposal to build one another up. When we come to meet as a church, what do we come for. As we are part of a church, what are we part of it for. To take what is imparted or to build one another up. We are all important parts of this body here in Swaffham – let's take the tools we have and build one another up.

So how do we finish this section off?

CONCLUSION 1. You have a gift use it – not for yourself but to strengthen encourage and comfort other believers and to reach unbelievers. Let's not limit our repertoire either – let's use the ones we're familiar with and get to use new ones. Sometimes we can be a little reticent about embracing new things. Many of you I know don't have a microwave. It's a new-fangled thing which you can't see a purpose for. Until you get one and then you don't know how you did without it. The same is true of the gifts of the Spirit we don't use routinely. Let's allow the Holy Spirit to open our hearts to embrace what He freely offers us.

CONCLUSION 2. Get down off your pedestal if you're on one. Whether that's a pedestal of having a gift others don't have, whether it's a pedestal of having a theology of gifts you think is superior to others then learn from the Corinthians. Get off your pedestals and perches before God knocks you off! What's most horrifying about the unloving attitude of the Corinthians was some of them had to die before they would listen. You are who you are by the grace of God and what you know and experience is by His grace. So instead don't sit in the satisfaction and honour of the gifts you have got through no merit of your own. Use them in love by serving others – your fellow believers, other people and bring God glory by using them.

12 Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.