

Spiritual Gifts in Perspective

- 1 Corinthians 13:1-3
- This is one of the most beloved passages in all of Scripture, this description of love. And you see it often in weddings, on the program or in the service. It is wonderful, and powerful and true. After tough discussions of sexual immorality in the church, participating with demons in worship services, head coverings, and people getting drunk at communion, this passage is a breath of fresh air. Love! What could be better than love and romance! But that is not why Paul inserted it here. He didn't suddenly get a little warm spot in his heart and wanted to wax romantic for a bit. No, this is a continued discussion about spiritual gifts. This chapter is not about marriage but about how we as believers use our spiritual gifts in the body of Christ.
- I really thought we would get to the description of love, beginning in verse 4. But that will wait until June 30, after Cindy and I get back from Moldova, Lord willing. And that's ok because love is patient. I also think it's important that we lay the foundation for our discussion about love's properties by dispelling a popular belief about it. It is often said that love is not a feeling but is an act of the will. I have been guilty of saying that, and I want to say that I was wrong. Love IS a commitment and an action, but love is also a feeling. How do we know? Love is kind. It does not envy. Those are feelings. Love is not irritable. Love rejoices. Feelings! It is true that love is more than feelings, but it is certainly not less. Are there times when you don't feel love for your spouse or for someone in the church, but you go ahead and act as if you do? Of course. But that is less than ideal. If you were to say to someone, "You know I do love you, but nothing about you excites feelings of affection in me for you," that would not be received with great feelings of... well, affection. There would be *feelings*, but they would not be positive. If love were only an action, a commitment of the will, then surely giving *all that we have* to help others would be a tremendous act of love, wouldn't it? But according to the text it is possible to give everything and do it without love. Love is more than just a good deed. We only have to look at the ways Jesus loved people to understand that love involves affection, not just action. He wept when he saw the way Mary and Martha were grieving over the death of their brother. He said to his disciples in the upper room, "Let not your heart be troubled." He knew their hearts would be broken in less than 24 hours, and he spoke tenderly to them because he loved them. Then he showed them with his actions, not just his heart, by willingly laying down his life for them, and for you and me. Love is seeking the best for the other person, even if it costs you something.
- That is the kind of love with which we are to use our spiritual gifts. I said this to you several weeks ago: **I think the question, "Do you know what your spiritual gift is?" is less important than, "Do you have a concern and a desire to strengthen others in the church?" I would add to that, "Do you have a desire to show love to the body, and want to make sure your heart is right, and your gift is being used?"** To put it another way, Paul demonstrates in these first three verses that character is more important than any gift, every day of the week and twice on Sunday!
- As we will see as we continue, when we use spiritual gifts without the heart motive of love, it may even do harm to the body.
- Sam Storms writes, "One of the most dangerous and destructive things that can happen in the life of a local church is when people prize a person's gifting above their character. They witness a miracle or are impressed by someone's eloquence or are stunned by the accuracy of a prophetic word, and then conclude that such a person is in a *special class* of Christians who must be granted *special exemptions and special privileges*. 'We can't hold them accountable to the basic principles of discipleship and the responsibilities that the rest of us embrace. After all, they are so obviously anointed by the Spirit that we dare not touch them or call them to account or expect them to live as the rest of us ordinary believers do.' That is a recipe for disaster and must be resisted at every turn."
- Let's look at the three examples Paul gives us in this text of ways we can elevate spiritual gifts above love. Or use spiritual gifts without love. Paul addresses his concerns with what we say, what we know, and what

we do, when those three, speech, knowledge, and action are divorced from love. In each case, Paul brings a charge against the person using the gift, not the gift itself.

- **What we say: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels.” (verse 1)**
- The Corinthians were into impressive speech and speaking in tongues was at the top of their “impress me” chart. But Paul says, including himself in this, if any of us speak even in the language of the angels, but our message is simply carried about by vocal chords and wind, but not undergirded by love, then it’s better that you don’t say it. It’s just noise. In fact, it’s noise that irritates, like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. It has sound but no sense, it’s mumbling with no message, it’s words without wisdom. Now, notice carefully that Paul does not say the gift is bad or the gift should not be used at all. His complaint is against the speaker, not the gift. Tongues isn’t a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Paul says that the person *has become* a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal, which seems to mean that a person who persists in using the gift of tongues without doing so motivated by love for the body may do harm to himself and the body.
- **What we know: “If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains...” (verse 2)**
- Prophecy was and is a valuable gift. We will see that it is able to convict the sinner who comes into a church service, as the “secrets of his heart are disclosed” so that he falls on his face and worships God. But prophecy without love is a vain exercise, and one that can bring harm to the people of God. Sometimes people prophesy just to be heard, and just to appear that they know something, that they understand a mystery of God or they have knowledge that no one else in the church does. Most of you have heard the story of the woman who showed up at Antioch one Sunday way back in 1988 or so, and introduced herself to me as Miriam White. But then she said, “I am the Bride of Christ.” “Mrs. White,” I said, “You can be a part of the bride of Christ, but you cannot BE the bride of Christ. You see, the Bible is very clear that the church is His bride and He is coming back to get us one day to take us home to heaven. He is not coming back to get just one person, but the whole church.” She smiled at me like she was a sixth grader and I was a kid who had just graduated from kindergarten and was bragging that I could “cipher” all the way up to my sixes.
- “The Lord has revealed to me that I am the Bride of Christ,” she insisted. I was surprised she didn’t reach out and pat me on the head when she said it. Well, that conversation fizzled out pretty quickly after that, but it was one of those times when you think of all kinds of things you SHOULD have said when you get home that day. I knew we were in for trouble with Mrs. Bride, so I alerted the other elders about it at our next meeting. Sure enough, it wasn’t long before it happened. She showed up at church soon after that wearing a full length, white dress, a flowy thing that looked a lot like something a bride might wear. I whispered a warning to my wife, something like, ‘Here comes the bride.’ We had just finished our time of praise and worship, when I stood up to ask if anyone in the church had something to share that would encourage the body. There were a few testimonies and thanksgivings, and then the Bride in White stood up. I didn’t want to be rude to her, and I didn’t really have a clue what she was going to say (that’s always the exciting part of having ‘open sharing time’ at church!), so I nodded that she could speak.
- “The time of the Gentiles is over!” she exclaimed. All heads swiveled as one as every person in the congregation turned to look. “God has closed the door on the Gentiles, and they will no longer be allowed to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Yea, I am returning to My people now,” she spoke “prophetically,” and “Israel will come back to the fold. But the day of the Gentiles is over.” She took a breath, and I was hoping along with everyone else that she was finished, but the ‘bride’ was just getting warmed up. “Not only that,” she said, “The Lord says there will be a plague of ants on the earth.” I thought, *There goes our church picnic at the park next week!*
- I will tell you the rest when we get to chapter 14, but suffice it to say, here was a demonstration for our very young church of what it looks like when someone uses a gift without love. If she had a spiritual gift in either

prophecy or words of knowledge, those were drowned out that day by her lack of character, lack of love for the body of Christ, and lack of respect for authority.

- Even if we have such faith that we can say to a mountain, get up and get into the sea, as Jesus said once in describing the faith we are called to pray for, even then, if we do that without love, Paul says that we are nothing. Nothing! Without love, such gifts are empty and self-serving.
- **What we do: “If I give away all that I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned...”**
- Each step up the ladder seems more extreme. Speaking in tongues of angels. Having faith to speak to a mountain so that it moves. Sacrificing everything you have, giving it all away, to help others. Finally, the ultimate sacrifice: you willingly give your body to be burned. Even in this, if the motive is not love, it is wasted. It means nothing. And as Paul says, you gain nothing.
- So, we need to see that just having a gift of the spirit says nothing about us as a person. Even using the gift says nothing about us as a person. No matter how eloquent we are in speaking, even in tongues, or no matter how generous we are in giving, even to the point that we give all that we have to others, without love, these gifts and these sacrifices say nothing about us as a person.
- Isn't that the way it is in our homes? How do we know a man really loves his wife or a woman really loves her husband? We don't look at the size of their house or the cleanness of their bathrooms. We don't see it in the amount in their checkbook or the expense of their vacations. We don't even see it by the fact that they sit close on the park bench or the pew, and they speak kindly to one another. No, you see love by the way they look at each other, the way they serve the other and seek nothing in return, the way they talk to one another when no one else can hear them, the way they look forward to being together again when they are apart.
- Sam Storms writes, “Our worship, the passion of our praise, the energy we exude, the size of our offerings, the size of our buildings, the fact that we know a lot of theology and can out-argue anyone, amounts to nothing in the absence of love.”
- That's why Paul calls this, “a more excellent way.” May we press in to learning more and more how to love. And how to use our gifts because we love the body, each other, and want to see the body grow and be healthy!
- Prayer