

READING

1 Corinthians 12:12-31 NIV

SERMON

My Gift Is Better Than Your Gift

“But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.” (1 Corinthians 12:31 NIV)

“Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.” (1 Corinthians 14:1 NIV)

In between those two verses comes the chapter of love

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails...”
(1 Corinthians 13:4-8 NIV)

The more excellent way that Paul shows the church of God at Corinth was the way of love. If we were to be in the Corinthian church we would not have liked what we saw. We would have

- Divisions, factions where one group wanted to follow one person, whilst another group followed another – chapter 3
- There was the condoning, even being proud, that they were so tolerant that they allowed a sexual immorality that would not happen with people outside the church – chapter 5
- They were so at loggerheads with each other that they were taking each other to court – chapter 6
- Marriages were falling apart – chapter 7
- They were ignoring the feeling of others – chapter 8
- Having a fellowship meals together when some indulged in gluttony whilst others went hungry – chapter 10
- ‘Did Jesus really return from the dead?’ – a question being asked by some – chapter 15
- The use or rather misuse of spiritual gifts – chapters 12-14

It was a sorry tale and Paul is writing to try and put the church back on track, as it was being pulled this way and the other, by those within and those without. The devil loves it when as a church we are in disunity and so there no ministry going on because you cannot minister to one another when there is disunity. In the chapters 12-14 Paul is talking about three things:

- ⇒ Variety
- ⇒ Unity
- ⇒ Ministry

The church needed to know **the most excellent way**. (1 Corinthians 12:31 NIV) and were told to **follow the way of love** (1 Corinthians 14:1) and in between we have the chapter on love.

Variety

The gifts were a tremendous opportunity to show the wonderful variety that God gives to his people. The argument is there to read in chapter 12, verse 14

“Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?”
(1 Corinthians 12:14-17 NIV)

We are a body, not a body part. I can remember once being at a conference and towards the end of this conference we were in prayer and the speaker was receiving words of knowledge about people with illnesses and other matters and he was talking about back hips and then he said in this part of the room, there are around half-a-dozen people who are having bowel problems. Could the bowels please move over to this part of the church and we'll come and pray with you in a moment. I then had this mental picture of bowels slithering across the floor, but of course he meant the rest of their bodies to go with them!

There is variety in my body and yes when people have a disability like the loss of limb or a sense, there is great compensation made by the other parts of the body, but our bodies are made to work with limbs and senses, best. It would be ridiculous for the body to be all one organ, because then it would not get about. We know the argument is absurd and that is what those verses are saying

But this at times is what can happen. ‘I have a particular gift from God, have you got it?’ ‘No, then you cannot be a real Christian!’ Not everyone has one gift and there is not one gift for everyone – there is variety – there are different gifts. It seems as if the Christians in the church of God at Corinth were trying to squeeze everyone into the same mould and insisting that they have the same gift. This is not the way of love, but the way of coercion.

Unity

Then the letter to the church of God at Corinth is trying desperately to bring about unity, but there is disunity. We went through the list before of the problems within the church that was causing disunity.

It seems as if there was a pecking order of gifts and if you had some or even a particular gift that you were at the top of the pile and that all other gifts were rubbish. This is why in the letter we have, chapter 12, verse 21

“The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.”
(1 Corinthians 12:21-26 NIV)

All the gifts are important, even the ones that we think are unimportant. We usually only know that a gift is there at times when it is not there.

Just think for a minute – who is the most important person in the church on a Sunday? I don't want you to call out, just think internally.

- Is it the preacher? – Because without the gift of preaching we would not get a sermon, so not grow.
- Is it the worship leader? – Because without the gift of leading worship we would not be brought to God to praise him, to repent and then be more open to receive from God.
- Is it the musicians? – Because without the gift of creative communicators we would not be able to sing as well and praise God - you might even have to hear my singing!
- Is it maybe nowadays the people doing sound and visuals, making things happen? – Because without technical, practical gifts, we might be able to hear some people and those who have hearing loss would not have a loop to listen through or PowerPoint to help them with the bits of talk they do not quite catch.
- For the Corinthians it was the one or ones with the gift of tongues – being able to speak in a language of heaven that was not learnt, but had been given through the Holy Spirit.

I would say it is none of these – the most important people in church on Sunday morning who are practising hospitality – those on the door. If someone comes and is barked at when they approach, or just tossed a weekly notice sheet and Impact! and grunted at, what would a new person think. The people on the door, practising the gift of hospitality are the shop front of ADBC and so are very, very important.

But every gift is important and no one gift is better than another, but then why does Paul write in 1 Corinthians 12:31

“But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.” (1 Corinthians 12:31 NIV)

But eagerly desire the greater gifts. Does this not imply very strongly that there is a pecking order in the gifts? And just before that he has said, verse 27

“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?”
(1 Corinthians 12:27-30 NIV)

Having said **God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles**, does then the rest of the list fall into order and so he can say **But eagerly desire the greater gifts**.

However there is some dispute among Greek scholars as to whether the Greek here is the imperative or the indicative. We have the imperative in the text i.e. **But eagerly desire the greater gifts**, but in the margin of the church Bible and maybe in yours if you are not looking at a church Bible we see the indicative i.e. **But you are eagerly desiring the greatest gifts**. The indicative being a description of what is going on, whilst the imperative is an order.

- If it is the indicative, then the church of God at Corinth is being told off for eagerly desiring the greatest gifts, or at least what they think is the greatest gift, and it seemed to be tongues. Paul goes on in chapter 14 to compare tongue and prophecy and shows that prophecy is greater, or can be in certain situations, than tongues. This is not to decry tongues but these are not for when non-Christians are around and prophecy in a corporate, church setting is of far greater worth for the building up of the people there than unintelligible tongues.

- If it is the imperative, the command to eagerly desire greater gifts then Paul may be having an ironic moment, as Darren reminded us last week that Paul was doing this when he introduces the whole topic in chapter 12, verse 1

“Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant.”
(1 Corinthians 12:1 NIV)

The culture in which they lived was not ignorant about spiritual gifts, but they were in reality. Paul says I want you to eagerly desire the greatest gifts and the greatest gift of all is love which is why we read in chapter 14, verse 1

“Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts,...” (1 Corinthians 14:1 NIV)

Eagerly desire spiritual gifts with no qualification.

Unity does not happen when one person says

“My gift is better than yours.”

That is a bit like when I was playing out as a kid and a bigger kid picked on me I would say, “I’ll get my mum onto you” because I had no siblings to turn to and my mum was scarier than my dad! My gift is better than your gift does put someone else down and that does not help with unity, that does not help unite a body, that is not ministry.

Ministry

There is a poem written called *Desiderata*. I first heard it when I began teaching and it was said several times in Assemblies as the nearest thing that some people who took Assembly could get to something religious. The poem begins

Go placidly amid the noise and the haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence.

As far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even to the dull and the ignorant; they too have their story. Avoid loud and aggressive persons; they are vexatious to the spirit.

If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter, for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself. Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

We should not be comparing ourselves with others in respect of gifts, the *pneumatikos*, the gifts that belong to the Holy Spirit, *the pneuma*. The gifts, the *charisma* that are given by God’s grace, God’s *charis*. The spiritual gifts are there so we can minister to each other, with variety to bring unity and as we minister to help one another grow in God and so grow together, so we can take the message of the gospel, the fact that Jesus came and died for each of us out to a needy world.

In this area of spiritual gifts we should make 1 Corinthians 14:12 our watchword

“...Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.” (1 Corinthians 14:12 NIV)

Or as the Message puts it

...Since you're so eager to participate in what God is doing, why don't you concentrate on doing what helps everyone in the church? (1 Corinthians 14:12 MSG)

Let us revel in the variety of gifts God gives to us. Let us strive to make unity our aim and to minister to each other, to build one another up.