

Love as a Way of Life: Putting Spiritual Gifts in Perspective

This morning, we begin a new series on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These are covered by the Apostle Paul in First Corinthians chapters twelve to fourteen. It's good to remind ourselves that this is actually a letter written by Paul after receiving some disturbing news about the church at Corinth. The church was characterised by arrogant, shameful and inappropriate behaviour. This included a disregard for others at the Lord's Supper, open immorality, taking fellow Christians to court and a misuse of the spiritual gifts. This sets the scene for his response to this young church.

⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸ To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. 1 Corinthians 12: 7-10.

As we begin our series on the spiritual gifts in first Corinthians, I wanted to begin by asserting that when it comes to the use of the gifts in our lives or in the church that we start with the most important teaching from Paul on the gifts. Love as a way of life. Without love the gifts are worthless.

Yet, one of our greatest problems is defining love. Popular culture uses the word to mean just about everything except what the Bible means by it. So, Christians are easily misled to thinking that love is primarily a feeling, something you fall in and out of. Throughout Scripture including this chapter love is first an action, an unconditional commitment. Paul is contrasting this with the destructive ways that the Corinthians are using the gifts. As Craig Blomberg comments, **"Love as the centrepiece of the Christian life must remain believers focus in every era and culture"**. (Craig Blomberg, 1 Corinthians, NIV Application commentary, page 263).

¹ If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have 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 do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails. 1 Corinthians 13: 1-8.

Paul's point in this chapter is quite simple and straightforward. The church at Corinth had drawn all sorts of false conclusions about spiritual gifts. Some believed that certain spiritual gifts were a sign of maturity. Others thought themselves superior to their fellow believers because they operated in the more overtly miraculous gifts.

Some even argued that if you had this or that gift, it meant that God loved you more than others. Then of course there was the tendency in Corinth to ignore the needs of other Christians and to exploit one's spiritual gift to gain power, prestige or influence.

Paul's response is quick and to the point. He says in no uncertain terms: If love for other Christians does not control and shape how you employ your spiritual gift, your gift is worse than worthless, it is dangerous. Spiritual gifts are a wonderful blessing from God but compared to the transcendent value of love they are but a temporary and incomplete dimension of Christian life.

Paul makes it clear that "love" is not simply one more among the many spiritual gifts that are distributed to the body of Christ. Rather, "love" is a way of life, a virtue that is to characterize the desire for and exercise of all spiritual gifts. This "love" transcends every spiritual gift individually and all of them taken together. It is more important and more valuable and more beneficial to the body of Christ than the collective power of tongues, prophecy, healing and miracles.

However, don't draw the wrong conclusion from this. In saying that love is better than spiritual gifts, he does not mean that spiritual gifts are bad. His purpose in this chapter is not to devalue spiritual gifts. He simply means that in the scramble for gifts and the tendency that some of them might produce pride and arrogance, love must be seen as preeminent. So, spiritual gifts are good and important and, in my opinion, indispensable to the church, but only if exercised in love. In the absence of love, they are utterly worthless.

Let me put it in slightly different terms. Paul is saying as clearly as he can that character always trumps gifting. The virtues of the Spirit, or the fruit of the Spirit, are always to be valued above his gifts. 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.

The meaning and value of the gifts cannot be separated from but are determined by the love that accompanies their exercise. Otherwise, they become a self-centred display of one's own giftedness'. They serve no purpose for the church but become a noisy, obtrusive and annoying sound with no benefit to anyone.

Kimlyn Bender in his Theological Commentary on first Corinthians says this about verses four to seven, **"these verses are the heart of the entire passage on spiritual gifts and indeed the heart of the pastoral advice given throughout the letter" (page 224)**. All of Paul's hopes and desires for the church are poured out in these brief verses.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8. **⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.** To enact patience is to provide others with the time they need to become what they need to be. To love others is to acknowledge the Spirit's work in others and to accept the divinely appointed pace of that work. We are to be patient because God is patient with us. As we have received the patience of God, so we are to extend that patience to others.

Love is kind. Kindness like patience is a fruit of the spirit. Love does not envy. Now we see that love is defined not only by what it is but also by what it isn't. Jealousy is what led to the divisions and strife at Corinth. Envy and jealousy are works of the flesh (Gal 5: 20-21).

To act in love to one another is not to envy another's gifting but to rejoice in their giftings as they benefit the whole church.

Love does not boast. When you boast you brag that you've got what they don't. Love is not arrogant or puffed up. Paul particularly has in mind those who strut about and are puffed up because they've got a spiritual gift that draws more attention and causes a stir and perhaps is more overtly supernatural.

Love is not proud or rude. Arrogance and inappropriate behaviour are not God honouring or honouring others in the church. Here, particularly, Paul has those in this church that had a complete disregard for others at the Lord's supper (11: 21-22, 33-34), and practised open immorality (5: 1-2, 6: 12 -20).

⁵ It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love is not arrogant or puffed up. Paul particularly has in mind those who strut about and are puffed up because they've got a spiritual gift that draws more attention and causes a stir and perhaps is more overtly supernatural.

In an age in which demanding one's rights is considered a virtue we must read again and again that love is not *self-seeking*. Perhaps he has in mind those who are pushy and demanding when it comes to using their gift. It's the sort of person who is inconsiderate of others and thinks only of how his or her gift is going to benefit oneself.

I'm thinking of those occasions (hopefully rare!) when a person is so persuaded that God wants them to speak or prophesy or minister in some way that they resist and resent the guidance, wisdom, and counsel of church leaders who believe it isn't the right time and should be put on hold until a more opportune moment. They "rudely" insist on using their gift then and there and disregard the advice of their leaders. Fortunately, we don't have that problem at Ranui.

Love does not insist on its own way. Even when you may legitimately be entitled to something, love defers, love takes the low road, love seeks to be second rather than first, love prompts a person always to be asking, "How might my gift be used to promote others rather than myself? How might my gift be used to affirm and praise and promote someone else rather than me?"

Love is not irritable. Or, as some translations render it, "love is not easily angered." This is for those whom anger is hiding barely beneath the surface. It is an explosive and defensive anger. It's almost as if some people are just waiting for the slightest offense, the slightest criticism, so they can explode in anger and irritable self-defence. They are just waiting to take exception to something others say. Genuine Christian love does not do that.

"Love keeps no record of wrongs." Here Paul is talking about those times when someone really does offend you, when they truly have sinned against you, when their offense is genuine and uncalled for. Love doesn't keep a record of it so it can be brought up at some future time and thrown back into someone's face to be used against them. Love doesn't keep score!

⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails.

Rather, love rejoices with the truth. A person motivated by genuine love will look for opportunities to affirm those who have done well. Love is always on the lookout for the chance to shine a light on something done right or a truth made known. Christians do no one a favour if they remain pleasant but fail to communicate important truths which promote a biblical understanding and worldview. However, all the truth in the world, when not transmitted in a spirit of sensitivity and compassion is likely to fall on deaf ears.

Love bears all things. Genuine love has a way of empowering a person to endure even in the worst of circumstances. This is not meant to suggest that we don't hold people accountable for their sinful behaviour. Paul's point is simply that love guards us against being excessively self-defensive and always looking at things in terms of how it is going to affect us.

Love always trusts. Again, Paul isn't telling us to be gullible or naïve. There are some things we must always disbelieve! His point, rather, is that love labours to be generous and accepting rather than cynical and suspicious. Love gives people the benefit of the doubt until all facts are known.

Love always hopes. Even when you've been hurt. Love empowers you to hope for the best and to give a person a second chance. Perhaps even a third and a fourth. Love looks for the best in people and only concedes the worst when evidence is overwhelming.

Love always perseveres. The reason why Christian love perseveres is because the mind and heart are shaped by love. God causes all things to work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose. This especially includes the painful and distressing things that often can lead us to despair and disappointment.

As we move into this series on the Spiritual gifts, we must be mindful that Paul's description of love is not only for the church at Corinth. It lays out how we today should view these gifts. Any gift should be celebrated by all of us and lead to warm and loving relationships. Finally, for those of you who are new to this teaching. Don't be anxious. Listen to the teaching and be open to the Holy Spirit doing something new in your life for the benefit of us all.