

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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What is the Best Gift?

And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret? But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way. (1 Corinthians 12:28–31, KJV 1900)

And God hath set some in the church.... During our study of First Corinthians 12, I have referenced this verse on several occasions. It brings so much of this chapter together into a brief cohesive perspective. Early in the chapter Paul reminds the Corinthians that the Holy Spirit gives and administers spiritual gifts "...as he will." This simple verse (1 Corinthians 12:11) overflows with truth. Consider.

1. The Holy Spirit is not an "It," but "He." Forget the mythical and false "Star Wars Theology" that the Holy Spirit is "God's Active Force," as in "May the Force be with you." The Holy Spirit possesses the unique traits of personhood. He, not "It," is personal. We rob ourselves of rich blessings and joys by reducing "Him" in our minds to a mere impersonal power or influence.
2. Paul further emphasizes this truth by "...as he will." An impersonal force does not possess a will, but the Holy Spirit does possess a will, and He gives and administers spiritual gifts according to His will.
3. Spiritual gifts do not originate with the believer, but with God. Standing up and speaking whatever comes to your mind at the moment is random thinking out loud; it is not God-directed preaching. I am always surprised when I hear an otherwise thinking believer talk about preaching as if anyone in the church who reads his Bible can just stand up, read a verse, and start this random talking, and call it preaching. On occasion I've heard preachers say that they do not give advance thought to their sermons. They just "Follow the Spirit" and say whatever enters their minds, obviously thinking that the Spirit of God takes over their mind and robotically preaches through them. Often men who think in this way will quote Scriptures all over the Bible, often passages loosely related, if at all, in their sermons, leaving the congregation puzzled or confused, but not edified. One man described this speaking style as preaching every sermon "From Generations to Resolutions." This idea contradicts the teachings of Scripture. Although we have ample Scriptural evidence that the apostles,

Paul included, received direct revelation of truth from the Lord, Paul taught the young preachers under his charge to "Study" to learn those same truths and thereby to be able to impart that truth to others. (1 Timothy 4:15-16; 2 Timothy 2:7, 15) Sadly, the preacher who boasts that he gave no advance thought to his sermon often grievously proves the point all too well to his audience. To rely on the Lord is Biblical and commendable. To ignore or to contradict Scripture and claim that so doing is reliance on the Lord is a near equivalent to tempting the Lord, something that Scripture repeatedly forbids.

Mounce's *Complete Expository Dictionary* defines the Greek word translated "set" in this verse as "...to set, with design, in a certain arrangement or position." When the Lord bestows a spiritual gift, He both chooses the recipient and integrates that gift into the church "...as he will." To the extent that anyone who presumes to possess a spiritual gift tries to exercise that gift independent of the church he ignores the Lord's superintendence over him and over his gift. Over the years I have observed what, by observation leads me to believe that more men destroy their spiritual value to their church by ignoring this Biblical point than by any other single failure. The Lord never gives a spiritual gift to anyone and then either directs or permits that person to administer his gift independent of or apart from the church. The Holy Spirit both gives the gift and administers it. He does not direct the recipient or others to usurp the role of either gift-giver or gift-administrator. I have known more than one preacher whose wife decided that God called her to take over "Administration" of her husband's ministry, and every such case ended in unprofitable disaster to the man's benefit to the church. Notice the simple and clear language of the text, "*And God hath set some in the church....*"

In today's culture, there is often a subtle mindset that the only spiritual gift in any church is the gift of preaching. Nothing in this chapter, in Paul's extended three-chapter theses on spiritual gifts, or anywhere in the New Testament remotely indicates such a narrow scope of spiritual gifts. I suspect that

most often faithful believers in a church fulfill their spiritual gift without thinking of what they do as a spiritual gift at all. For them, doing the things that they do or saying what they say is just the kind and right thing to do for the benefit of the church. And every believer who truly fulfills his (Or her; while the gift of preaching is defined by the New Testament as given only to men, the Lord "Gifts" many women in a healthy church with rich spiritual gifts and loving wisdom that blesses the church) spiritual gift will do so with the service of the church and the people in it upper most in his/her mind. We can only honor the Lord who gave us this gift by using that gift to minister to His people. The moment anyone begins to think of his presumed gift in terms of how that gift might benefit himself or enhance his authority, respect, or position in the church he has lost sight of the Lord's purpose in giving it. Eventually the believer who loses this vision of his spiritual gift will also lose his profitability to the church, to the faith, and thereby to the Lord.

But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way. This verse is likely one of the more difficult to interpret in this context. How do we define "*the best gifts*"? We have seen that Paul emphasizes throughout the chapter that every gift has value and should be honored as the Lord's gift to the church. If you are coveting the best gift, how can there be yet a more excellent way?

The frequent view of this verse claims that each believer should "Covet" the best of spiritual gifts for himself. This attitude sounds far too similar to the attitude that Paul confronted and rebuked in the Corinthian Church. "Unless I have this or that gift, I will not be part of the body."

Any personalization of the action directed in this verse ignores the primary point that Paul has repeated and emphasized throughout the chapter. A spiritual gift is given in the setting of the Lord's church and is to be exercised in that church setting. Thus if we fulfill this verse's directed action, we must do so in a way that does not put our idea in contradiction to Paul's pointed teaching throughout the chapter regarding the harmony of all spiritual gifts "*...in the church.*"

Jesus directed the disciples to pray for the Lord of harvest to send laborers into "his harvest."

Therefore said he unto them, The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth laborers into his harvest. (Luke 10:2)

How do we reconcile Paul's "*...covet earnestly the best gifts*" with the context of 1 Corinthians 12, Jesus' words to the disciples, and other related passages? At one time I thought that this verse simply stated the obvious point that the Corinthians were wrongly practicing sinful envy regarding spiritual gifts, the point that Paul makes in the body analogy that he uses in this chapter. However,

language scholars agree that the verb "covet" in this verse is in the active voice and the imperative mood. This means that Paul is directing the Corinthians to do something, not simply observing what they were doing.

While Scripture uses the word "Covet" in terms of a sinful desire to gain what does not belong to us, the word may also refer simply to a strong desire, as we may occasionally say, "I covet your prayers for me and my family during this trial." The word "covet earnestly" in this verse was translated from the Greek root for the English word "Zeal." Zeal can be evil or highly commendable, depending on its object and how we practice it.

A spiritual gift flows from the Lord to the church through the individual believer to whom the Lord gives the gift, but Paul repeatedly teaches in this chapter that all spiritual gifts are given for the benefit of the body, so He "Sets" them in the body of the church. If we build on this point instead of ignoring it, we reach the conclusion that harmonizes with the dominant points of the chapter and with other related passages. Rather than teach individual members to "Covet," to strongly desire the best of spiritual gifts for themselves, I suggest that Paul was here teaching the Corinthians to think and to pray as members of the church body. Thus, their prayer should not be that the Lord give them individually the best spiritual gifts, but rather than they should pray for the Lord to bless the church with the best spiritual gifts, the gifts that He, "*...as he will*" determines that the church needs. The strong desire that Paul admonishes then is for the church, not for the individual believer.

A good prayer? A right desire? Yes. However, Paul will now guide the Corinthians and us to a still nobler way of thinking regarding the Lord, His church, and this whole issue of spiritual gifts.

What is the "*more excellent way*" of which Paul writes? Read 1 Corinthians 13. Paul considers this more excellent way so central and so important to the whole theme of spiritual gifts in the Lord's church that he will devote a whole chapter to its identity and character.

If we follow the inspired context of Paul's teaching, we move from the premise of spiritual gifts to the required manner in which the Lord commands us to fulfill our gift. "Charity," the King James word for "Love" in Chapter 13, is the required attitude and action that God commands in everything we do in the exercise of our spiritual gift. If we can't take the action dominated by the spirit of love, the God-kind of love that we learn about in this chapter, we fail God and we fail our spiritual gift. The greatest of gifts, referenced in the beginning of Chapter 13, exercised without this love is as useless as "*sounding brass.*" Without this God-kind of love, your very best effort in your spiritual gift has no more value than if you were blowing on a horn or clanging on a cymbal.

I tend to dislike cliches. All too often people use cliches instead of thinking beyond the superficial

point of the cliché to the more thoughtful point behind it. However, sometimes clichés serve us well by succinctly expressing the greater truth. Many years ago I was reading a book on this chapter that repeated a worthwhile cliché, “I don’t care how much you know till I know how much you care.” Watch the people in the pew as they listen to the man in the pulpit. You will see this cliché at work. If the man in the pulpit is speaking in harsh, brow-beating terms, the people in the pews are ducking and dodging to avoid the man and his words, not hanging on his words to learn. But, if the man in the pulpit is speaking in kind words, even in faltering speech, the people will be drawn to him and to his words. He exudes something that they know they need. And their need is not the ability to brow-beat or bully people. They’ve seen all too much of this sinful conduct all around them. They want to learn more about how the man speaks the truths of Scripture, even its sternest admonitions, in the spirit of grace and love toward them. Amen!

Likewise, the man in the pulpit should avoid making himself the central point of his sermon. Don’t devote a whole sermon to telling people your life story. You have a more important person to tell the people about! Follow Paul’s example. If you examine all of Paul’s sermons and defenses in Acts, twice and only twice did Paul mention his Damascus Road experience. Even in these two instances, he was quite brief in that narrative, going quickly into more substantial truth that deals with the gospel, not with a human interest speech about himself. Every preacher should filter every point of every sermon he preaches through one verse of Scripture.

For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake. (2 Corinthians 4:5)

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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