

1 Corinthians 14:1-19 – “Edifying The Church”

Last week we looked at a wonderful chapter – the love chapter! And of course, my wife as usual, let me know of another missed opportunity of a key song that summed up what we were looking at. Well, a couple songs actually. There’s the famous Petra song called Love, and there’s the DC Talk song, Luv is a Verb (Hey, tell me haven't ya heard? Luv, is a serious word. Hey, I think it's time ya learned. I don't care what they say, I don't care care what ya heard, The word luv, luv is a verb).

And that’s what we saw in Chapter 13. Love is all about action, it’s a verb. The chapter ended by stating that of the 3 main graces of the Spirit (faith, hope, and love) the greatest is love. Why? Because love never ends and love is what needs to be paramount for a church to function in health and blessing. And so as we move into Chapter 14, Paul begins with saying to pursue love!

1. The Prominence of Prophecy – 14:1-5

14:1-3 - *Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. ² For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. ³ But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.*

The word pursue is the Greek word *dioko* which means to chase after. It’s translated elsewhere as persecute. This is not a tip toe through the tulips type of falling in love, this is rather an aggressive focused grabbing a hold of love. This is what we should be striving for. We saw why in the last chapter. It’s because love drives us to be others centered rather than self centered. It causes us to serve and edify the body instead of seeking our own interests. So pursue love. Love is greater than the gifts because if you don’t have love, the gifts aren’t going to be helpful.

But this in no way minimizes the importance of gifts. We should still desire them and know that they have a place in the church.

And in Chapter 14 we see a contrast between prophecy and tongues primarily. Paul says ***desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy***. It seems kind of odd that Paul would sort of showcase one of the gifts when he’s been making a case to show that all the members of the body are important and have a part to play. And this certainly is true, but some gifts are going to be more

helpful in that they target a wider audience and build up a larger number at once. When someone prophesies in the gathering of the church, they are speaking out the Word of God for all to be edified.

- Prophecy certainly had an element of predictive foretelling of things to come. But it does not need to be restricted to that only.
- “Prophets did not just foretell the future or announce new special revelation from God. They also delivered statements or messages in praise of God, or a word of instruction, refutation, reproof, admonition, or comfort for others (see also Constable’s notes on 11:4). Paul’s point was that edifying the church is more important than edifying oneself.” ¹

Paul gets into some specifics about tongues that are important to understand because this is how abuses and misuses get brought into the church.

- I was brought up in a church where we would often hear tongues spoken during the service and someone would interpret it, but the interpretation was always brought as a ‘word from God’ to the church. Yet Paul clearly says that he who speaks in a tongue speaks to God and not to men.
- When the apostles in Acts 2 began to speak in tongues notice how the crowds responded: **Acts 2:7–11**, *“Then they were all amazed and marveled, saying to one another, ‘Look, are not all these who speak Galileans?’⁸ And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born?’⁹ Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes,¹¹ Cretans and Arabs—we hear them speaking in our own tongues the wonderful works of God.”*
- We also see this direction in **Acts 10:46**, *“For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God...”*

So the gift of tongues is speaking to God and yet it’s just mysteries to the one speaking it.

- Now keep in mind, the word for tongues in the Greek is *glossa*. This could mean the actual body part in your mouth. It also means a human language that is spoken by a people group in the world.
- So the gift of tongues is a language unknown to the one speaking it, but it’s a known language.

¹ Constable, Dr. Thomas L. <https://planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/1corinthians.pdf>

Some have thought that when Paul says the one speaking speaks mysteries, meant that they were speaking an unknown or new language, or perhaps a heavenly language. But that's not what is meant or implied in this passage. It's a mystery to the speaker because they don't know what they're speaking. They don't know that language.

- If I suddenly began to speak Chinese, it would be a real mystery to me what I was saying. And for many here in this room, you also would have no understanding of what was being said. So this gift wouldn't be very helpful to all of us on its own.

This is why Paul contrasts prophesy and tongues in this chapter. Because ***he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men.*** Tongues doesn't do a whole lot for the body on its own, but prophesy builds us up and encourages us by sharing a Word from God for us.

14:4 - He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.

The person that speaks in a tongue doesn't edify the church, he simply edifies himself. And that only in part. If you speak in a tongue you're edified because you know the Lord is using you to operate in that gift, but again, it's a mystery to you as to what you're saying. So, you're only edified in part, and nobody else is. But the one who prophesies edifies (or builds up) the church as a whole because everyone understands what they're saying.

- "Verse 4 is commonly used to justify the private use of tongues for self-edification. But the fact that the word "church" is found nine times in this chapter (vv. 4, 5, 12, 19, 23, 28, 33, 34, 35) offers rather convincing evidence that Paul is not dealing with a believer's devotional life in the privacy of his room, but with the use of tongues in the local assembly. The context shows that, far from advocating the use of tongues for self-edification, the apostle is condemning any use of the gift in the church that does not result in helping *others*. Love thinks of others and not of self." ²

14:5 - I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with

² MacDonald, W. (1995). *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments* (A. Farstad, Ed.; p. 1798). Thomas Nelson.

tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.

Paul was in no way trying to diminish or put down tongues. He says ***I wish you all spoke with tongues***... Notice he's not saying that all *should* speak in tongues, but only that he *wished* they did. It's a wish because he knows this isn't going to happen. It's like me telling my daughter that I wish she could get a new car for her birthday. But it's a wish not based in reality. In fact, Paul's already clarified that not all speak in tongues (12:30).

But it's a gift that when used correctly will benefit others.

What he would rather see though is for all to prophesy. Prophecy reveals the Word of God. In this day when the canon of Scripture was not yet complete, the gift of prophecy was very valuable as it edified the body in a greater way because all could understand it and receive from it.

- Even though those in Corinth seemed to gravitate to the gift of tongues, Paul would much rather see them prophesy.

But if tongues were to be used, then an interpretation must be given so that all can benefit from it (***that the church may receive edification***).

2. The Purpose of Tongues – 14:6-12

12:6 - *But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching?*

Paul could show up and begin speaking in tongues and it would be something to behold for this church, but they would gain nothing from it unless something was spoken that they understood (ie. ***revelation, knowledge, prophesying, teaching***).

Paul gives an illustration from everyday life to show the importance of this.

12:7-8 - *Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? ⁸ For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle?*

Musical instruments are wonderful. They make some incredible music. But they do so because you play different notes on them. Yet if one of those instruments just plays random notes, it's not going to be understood.

- Illustration of violon player in Kamloops.

- Paul seems to use this illustration to counter some things that were going on in Corinth. Not only were the people there trying to grab a hold of this gift of tongues, but they were adopting some of their former pagan practices which saw people speaking out in ecstatic utterances, or speaking gibberish. None of this was a genuine working of this gift.
- Much of what we see in the charismatic circle is this counterfeit 'unknown' language, or babbling unintelligible words. This is often taught and forced, rather than it being given as a gift.

14:9 - *So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.*

If words aren't used that people can understand, how will it benefit them? Otherwise it will just be like speaking into the air. It doesn't connect with anyone's brain or enters into the ears, it just stays out in the air.

14:10 - *There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance.*

Every language is useful to communicate with one another. If a language cannot do that then it's of no use. So each language is significant.

- Again, this seems to be said by Paul to counter the counterfeit tongues that were creeping into the church where they were speaking unintelligible words.
- "Every language has as it's purpose the communication of thought, and so they all possess structure, syntax, and vocabulary. In other words, there is no tongue that consists entirely of nonsense babbling." ³

14:11-12 - *Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me. ¹² Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel.*

You know that when you visit a country that speaks a different language, it's a little hard to get around and communicate. It can be quite frustrating, and you can feel pretty lost. This is what people in the church at Corinth were feeling like with so many speaking in a tongue that wasn't understood.

³ <https://versebyverseministry.org/lessons/1corinthians-2013-lesson-14b>

This is why Paul says to be zealous for gifts that will edify the church. He doesn't criticize them for being zealous for spiritual gifts, but he is correcting them on being zealous for gifts that were more for their selfish benefit than they were for blessing others.

- People were speaking in tongues, and very possibly masquerading in a counterfeit tongue, in an attempt to elevate themselves. Paul says that when the church uses gifts to build up one another, then they truly excel.

3. The Practice of Tongues – 14:13-19

14:13-14 - *Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. ¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.*

If a tongue is going to be spoken in the congregation, then let that person pray for the interpretation. Otherwise there's no benefit of that tongue.

Now many have said that they speak in tongues but primarily as a prayer language. So is the view that tongues is a prayer language biblical?

Paul seems to say so in vs. 14, ***if I pray in a tongue...***

The question is, is Paul giving a hypothetical situation to show that the important thing is that there is understanding/interpretation given so that all can benefit, even if it's a prayer in a tongue? It certainly reads that way in the context.

A private prayer language doesn't fit well because:

- a) It was to be interpreted – 14:13-17
- b) Gifts are for the edification of the church, not self-edification – 12:7
- c) Tongues is a sign for unbelievers – 14:22
- d) Not all speak in tongues. Why would people be excluded from a helpful prayer tool – 12:11; 28-30

14:15-17 - *What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. ¹⁶ Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? ¹⁷ For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.*

If you're praying or singing ***with the spirit*** (which means you're doing it personally and in the inward capacity of your spirit), nobody else is benefiting.

This is why Paul says he will also pray or sing with the understanding. And this is not just his own understanding, but the understanding of others.

- Paul uses bless (vs 16) and pray interchangeably here and his point is that if he blesses with the spirit how will anyone know what is being said and be able to give an **Amen** in agreement.
- The point of gathering together is for the common benefit and edification of one another (1 Cor 12:7). So Paul desires to see a word given that all can understand.

Now in saying all this, once again, Paul does not want to diminish the gift of tongues...

14:18-19 - *I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; ¹⁹ yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.*

Paul was someone that spoke in tongues more than the rest of them. Nobody could accuse Paul of not understanding this dynamic, or dismissing him as having no experience with tongues. He spoke it more than all of them. No doubt in his travels in foreign places this was a valuable gift. Yet when he was gathered in the church he would rather say 5 words that were understood than 10,000 in a tongue, so that all could be built up and encouraged.

- If I got up here and spoke this sermon in Swahili it may impress you, but it won't help you.
- Our purpose together is to teach, edify, and see us growing more and more in the image of Christ.

God is a good God and a giving God. He's graced us with gifts to bless us and so that we can bless one another.