

"Using our Gifts in Love"

by Pastor Jeffrey Miskus

Preached on the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany

Text: 1 Corinthians 12-13

DATE: January 31, 2010

IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST, OUR CRUCIFIED, RISEN AND ASCENDED LORD, WHO IS NOT DEAD BUT ALIVE, WHO IS NOT IN THE TOMB, BUT IS WITH US HERE, NOW WITH HIS LOVE AND HIS POWER AS HE LIVES AND REIGNS AT THE GLORIOUS RIGHT HAND OF GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER. DEARLY BELOVED CHILDREN OF GOD...

For the past two weeks we have been hearing about spiritual gifts. Just a quick review to begin... God has given each of us spiritual gifts. These gifts are to be used by us to serve the church. We heard that just as the parts of the human body serve the whole – each of us, with our gifts need to serve the church. We need each other to function properly as a church. Paul's teaching on this point ended with these words last week... 1 Corinthians 12:31, "But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way." At the end of this passage Paul encourages us to eagerly desire the greater gifts.

What makes one gift greater than another? Simple really, some gifts benefit the body of the church more than others do – these are greater. Paul explains this in 1 Cor. 14:1-5 with a great example... "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries with his spirit. But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified." So Paul encourages us to desire gifts that edify and build up the church – these are the greater gifts. We can pray for these gifts...we can make efforts to develop these gifts... And we can ask God's Holy Spirit to open our hearts to receiving these gifts. That prayer may sound something like this... "God – I want to serve your church..."

“Open my eyes to see where you need me – gift me where you need me to be a blessing.” “Fill me with the gifts you need me to have to edify your church.” “Keep my heart and mind open to any and all gifts so that I don’t blind myself to areas you see that I can be a blessing.” Perhaps some of you are wondering... “What about me? My health is failing and I have infirmities that prevent me from physical service. What do I do?” Perhaps your gift is in the area of prayer for the church – prayerfully upholding those who are gifted to serve in other ministries. Perhaps your gift is in the area of giving to the church – using the money God has given you to generously support the ministries that God has gifted others to serve in. Romans 12:6-8 reads, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.” If you have physical problems you can still pray. You can also be the voice that encourages others as they serve. You can come along side them and telling them how much you appreciate their ministry. You can encourage them that you are committed to praying for them and supporting their ministry with your prayers and giving. Some of you need to pray for that gift – the gift of encouraging. Ministry can be very discouraging. People serving need those with the gift of encouragement.

Those that give of their time and effort don’t always see the fruits of their labours. They get down – wonder if it’s all worth it – their faith is tested. Then along comes someone and says, “I thank God for your ministry – I have been praying for you and asking God to bless your efforts for his Kingdom. Keep fighting the good fight. I’m going to make sure your ministry is supported and blessed.” What an incredible edification that gift is to the church. I can tell you that there are people in this congregation right now that need those words of encouragement.

But hear Paul’s teaching again... 1 Corinthians 12:31, “But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.” There is an excellent way to use your gifts.

Paul is talking about our motive – the driving force behind the use of our gifts. As we pray for spiritual gifts and seek to serve and use them for the sake of the church Paul says there is to be an all dominating

motive...love... Listen to what Paul writes, “And now I will show you the most excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 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 have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.” This passage is often read at weddings (and that’s OK) but the context is all about the motive behind using our spiritual gifts to serve the church.

Paul begins, “Suppose that I as the Lord’s apostle have the highest possible gift of tongues – that I am able to speak in all the languages that men use, and those that even the angels use.”

But wait... If I have not love – despite this wonderful gift from God – says Paul, I am nothing more than a loud, clamorous, shrill, harsh, empty sound. True, this great gift would still be a sign of God’s power and love, and its interpretation would bless the hearers... But the person himself who speaks without love would be no better than a lifeless brass instrument which someone else causes to sound or to ring. But wait – What if I had the gift of prophecy! And I knew all of the mysteries that are involved in God’s plans of grace and of providence – in fact – let’s say that I knew all mysteries – big and small. And then let’s add to that knowledge... Let’s say that I had all knowledge – the billions upon billions of facts and information – more than any human mind could ever hope to know and recall. But wait – let’s add something every more amazing... Let’s say on top of all those gifts I had a faith so great and powerful that I could do what Jesus promises in Matthew 17:20, “... I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

Let’s say I had that kind of faith, combined with the gift of prophecy and the gift of knowing all divine mysteries and all knowledge. You’d think I was something great wouldn’t you? Well... understand something... if I had all that and had not love – I’d be nothing. Men might honour me, admire me, and elevate me. The church might even praise and thank God for me. But if I didn’t have love despite these great gifts – I personally would amount to nothing. Love, you see, is more precious and wonderful than all gifts because love alone makes the gifts precious possessions to those who have them. Let me repeat that... Love is more precious and wonderful than all gifts

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But wait... Let's go one step further... Let say I voluntarily give all my possessions away to the poor – AND – give my very body and life as a martyr to save others. If I did those ultimate deeds of selflessness and self-sacrifice – BUT HAD NOT LOVE – I personally would profit nothing. Brothers and sisters – the works of love are often imitated by those who have no love and yet desire to enjoy the praise of love.

Doing selfless acts without love profits the doer nothing. That's because doing selfless acts for selfish reasons does not fool God. R. H. Lenski writes, "The inside of many a deed is different from the outside, and God always lifts the cover, yea, for his eyes no cover exits." The greatest gifts and the grandest deeds together with all their splendour and wonder ARE NOTHING... MAKE US NOTHING... AND BRING US NOTHING... IF LOVE IS ABSENT.

On the other hand – with love present in the heart – all gifts and all works, great and small, become the treasures which God intends them to be for their possessor. The source of this love is none other than God Himself... "We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19) What God did for us – he did out of love. God didn't send Jesus to die for us because he felt obligated. God didn't send Jesus to die for us because he felt guilty. God didn't send Jesus to die for us for selfish reasons.

God did all he did for us out of love. Love was behind Jesus' death for our sins. Love was behind his resurrection. Love is behind his call for us to repent and follow him. Love is behind his gifting us to serve... And as love was behind all that God did for us – love is to be behind all that we do for him, and for others as we use our gifts to serve God's Church. And the good news is that you – as a follower of Jesus are free to love.

You need not earn your salvation – God has given it to you through Jesus. All you do for God and others – you are free to do completely and totally out of love.