

The Rock: 09-26-2021

The Gifts series

First reading: Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-8

Title: For the common good

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:8-11

Theme:

When we lose sight of the purpose of the gifts, we no longer think in terms of the common good, but rather "my personal edification".

Introduction:

N.T. Wright say something fascinating, to me anyway, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians. When addressing this section of Paul's letter, he writes:

"...the point of being in touch with the things of the Spirit is not in order to have exciting experiences but so that you will be loyal to Jesus, the risen Lord."

-NTFE. Pg. 156

I found it interesting, because that is usually the last thought we have when we think of the gifts. Loyalty to our King.

Yet, that ultimately is the case, isn't it? To make Jesus known. To worship Him and be loyal to His calling in your life, in my life.

This drove me to think along two lines. The first being the issue of tongues. The second being the point Paul is trying to make in relation to the wrong focus of this church.

The Story:

We focused last week on love being the primary driver for everything. But we come to see that these folks had lost that in pursuit of selfish desires and comparisons to one another.

And it seems that tongues are always the focal point of the issues addressed and disputes. Not much has changed in church life. It is the only gift that appears in all three lists Paul gives.

It is always listed last, not because it is the least of the gifts, but rather because it is always the problem. I got to thinking on this, and whether in a language we understand or not, tongues are always the issues.

James takes a good amount of ink to address the danger of the tongue:

-James 3:5-10 (ESV)

"So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so."

There is no real surprise there from today all the way back to the beginning of the Bible. In Genesis 11 what do we find there?

A people in absolute rebellion, building a tower (their kingdom) on the plains of Shinar:

-Genesis 11:1-4 (ESV)

"Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us

make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."

The last endeavor of a rebellious people is to make themselves a name by trying to be like God. Building a tower to the heavens.

Together they had become completely idolatrous -with themselves at the center of it all. How little things have changed.

The last scene here in chapter 11 where humanity falls completely, we see that God "curses the tongue. He confused their language so that they can no longer understand each other:

-Genesis 11:6-7 (ESV)

"And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech."

God did this because of the direction they were headed. Toward "self" and personal glorification. This is always the pattern with humanity. Sin leads to idolatry, which leads to disunity of the body.

The reversing of this curse happened on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, when the outpouring of the Holy Spirit occurred. The healing of the Nations began there and then:

-Acts 2:5-7 (ESV)

"Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished..."

Do you see what's happening here? In our own selves we always tend to lean away from God and toward ourselves. Our tongues being the primary driver of how we praise or curse.

Those praises can be self-centered or they can be God-centered.

Frankly, tongues are always the issue with humanity. The way in which we communicate today, in fact where sarcasm and cynicism are right at the top of the

list in how we address just about every issue.

I leave that with you to sort out as you watch the news, read the paper and read social media blasts into the ether, most especially from those meant to lead us.

Remembering what James said earlier, we need this reminder that no matter what language, tongues is always the issue, for good or ill.

Back to Corinth, and what we are discovering here in this church is that tongues has become THE divisive issue.

Why? Because once again the focus is not on God's glory, but on self - glory and position. The one who is to be the object of their praise has become a secondary target in relation to their desire to have the gifts which glorify their standing within the community. Losing love in the process.

Gordon Fee in his commentary (a Pentecostal) says:

"Their passion for tongues in the assembly was further indication of their failure to love one another. Love, however, is not set forth in contrast to tongues, but as the necessary ingredient for the expression of all spiritual gifts. The reason for the gifts is the

edification of the church, which is precisely what love aims at."

-NICNT Pg. 572

If the church, in general, and the local church in specific lacks love for one another, then what on earth do we have then to offer anyone who is not yet in Christ?

You see, the entire point and purpose which Paul is driving us towards is the Cross centered life of selflessness.

This crazy notion (according to the world) that the "other" is always more important than the "self". In this fiercely individualistic world and culture, that is a difficult thing to process.

As we gather as God's people, it is seen in our expression of service in ministry within our local congregation. That is what brings us to maturity.

What are we to be doing first within this body on a Sunday morning, and then within our weekly endeavors?

You see, the balance of chapter 12 emphasizes the importance of the entire body, not just certain parts of it, functioning together for God's glory and the common good.

So in and through service to others, not only are they blessed and growing to maturity, but through our working in ministry, so are we.

Unity-ministry-maturity. When the body is unified (The Corinthian Church was not) except in disagreement, and each person is functioning in ministry to that body, then and only then will spiritual maturity happen.

Paul is striking the balance here when he bookends this list in the way he does. 8-10 are surrounded by 7-11.

Brilliant observation, I know, but it's what he says that makes it crucial for us.

-1 Corinthians 12:7 (ESV)

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

-1 Corinthians 12:11 (ESV)

"All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills."

AS HE WILL. This is the point. Everything is given by grace, by the Spirit for the overall benefit of the entire body. In serving, we are served.

This, then, removes the boasting of what gift you may have or which one seems more important to get so we have "status" within the local congregation.

"As He wills" is absolutely essential to understand. Grace means we are given all good things from our Father in Heaven, even when we don't deserve it.

It's a gift, not something earned. Performance and comparison with others as well as the constant attempt to please people by doing what they want isn't necessary under grace.

Paul lists these gifts, and remember, this is not an exhaustive list, just read on here in the letter as well as in other places, like Romans 12.

But, when he lists these, it is important to see that all only function under God's grace and in love.

Wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, tongues, and interpretation.

As we have been wired, and by God's grace alone, we receive:

-1 Corinthians 12:8-10 (ESV)

"For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues."

Having been wired and gifted a particular way by God, uniquely by His design as part of this body, the question becomes: Where do I fit in, LORD?

Ask the right question in the right way, God will show you and sort it out for you.

Again, the uneasiness comes when we begin to compare, as the Corinthians did. They compared themselves in light of themselves, instead of in light of who Jesus made them to be, in all of their uniqueness.

They then thought they were better than each other based on what gift they had. That brought disunity to the church. It still does!

When we forget grace, we forget how to treat one another. It is never that we

overlook things that perhaps are wrong,
but we handle them differently.

IF we grasp the grace of God given to us
in Jesus, we begin to have the proper
focus and outlook. Focusing on Jesus
first and the unity of the spirit,
ministry will flow as we learn that it is
in service (sacrificial service) done in
love because of grace, we grow in
maturity.

The greatest example we have is Jesus.
The Corinthians had become, or rather,
they had failed to become Christlike.

That does not mean they were rejected by
God because of their shortcomings. If
that were the case, we would all be lost.
No, that's why we have this letter.
Through Paul, God is correcting and
redirecting them.

Sinclair Ferguson, in his book, Lessons
from the Upper room talks about Jesus as
our savior AND example.

You see, Jesus, on his last night with
his friends, chose to play out before His
disciples a life skill He wanted them to
live out once He was gone.

-John 13:3-5 (ESV)

"Jesus, knowing that the Father had given
all things into his hands, and that he

had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him."

Now, this is not the example of the new "foot washing ministry" to show people that you love Jesus. At the very least that is what it can be, but it is the Messiah King, the one who should never wash feet, doing so to show how He loves through how He gives of Himself.

Quoting Ferguson:

"Do you understand what I have done to you?" Jesus asks (John 13:12) In other words, "Do you see the significance of this-for Me-and for you too?"

"I have washed your feet," He says. "If you understand what I have done, it will lead to a transformation in you; you will begin to do what you failed to do before we sat down to eat; you will follow My example. You will kneel before your fellow disciples , and by your humble service say to them, 'I am your servant, for Jesus' sake'" (cf. 2 Cor.4:5).

-Lessons from the upper room: Pg. 18

-2 Corinthians 4:5 (ESV)

"For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."

Learning that He is not only our savior, but our example is where our growth comes. Saying, "Jesus is Lord", is quite simple actually. It's just words.

How do we know it's true and that we believe that? By doing, that's how. By showing, behaving, and serving.

That is Cruciformed living and selflessness. Shaped by the cross of Jesus Christ - the most selfless act ever seen. It cost Jesus everything, and us nothing.

Yet, because of Jesus serving to the death, we have received everything through grace, and by faith. The gifts are given as He wills, for His glory and the common good of all.

That is why it was such a problem for Paul as he wrote to this church. It was all about them and what served them. They had failed to learn that fundamental lesson from the upper room.

That the greatest among you will be your servant. That the first will be last and the last first. Jesus, who was the only one in that room who deserved Kingly treatment, became servant to men arguing

over who would get the best seat in the house.

Can we put ourselves aside in order that we can grow forward together, in order that the "other" is served? In order that the lost can be reached, that the broken can find a home here, that the outcast and the prodigal can sit at the table of God's goodness and grace?

That is love. That is maturity. That is when the gifts begin to have their intended impact, as the world sees a united Church, empowered and empowering their community for the gospel.

(Dave and Sue Southwick -serving us communion, as their last act of service to this body of believers)