

# 1 Corinthians 14:1–19

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 17 August 2025

Preacher: Bing Nieh

[ 0 : 00 ] Again, it is 1 Corinthians 14, 1-19. Pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.

! For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men, but to God. For no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the spirit. On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy.

The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues unless someone interprets so that the church may be built up. Now brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?

If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?

[ 1 : 07 ] So with yourselves. If with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning.

But if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker a foreigner to me. So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.

What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also. I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say amen to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?

For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church, I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others than 10,000 words in a tongue.

[ 2 : 25 ] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Good morning.

Let's turn to the Lord briefly in prayer. Father, we hear your invitation, your people to come. Everyone who thirsts, those who have no money to come and buy.

Eat. And Father, we come to you and sit under your word and give heed to what you have said.

To listen diligently to you. To eat what is good. Incline our ears to hear that our souls may live. And so, Father, now we come to your word.

It's living and active nature. That we may hear. That our souls may live. Be our help, we pray. We ask these things for Jesus' sake.

- [ 3 : 31 ] Amen. Well, consider this scenario with me. You're with a co-worker. A near religious co-worker. You're on a Monday morning.
- You're out to lunch. Or you're out to lunch. And when you recap the past weekend, you share that on Sunday you went to church. Your co-worker pauses and responds.
- And replies, I've never been to church before. What is it like? What do you do there? Why do you go? Why do you go?
- How do you respond? What would you say? Well, the Pew Research Center, probably the leading research group in this country on religious and spiritual life, conducted such a survey and asked adults why they go to church.
- Of those who go to church, 81% say, I go to become closer to God. Of those surveyed, 69% replied in this way, so my children will have a moral foundation.
- [ 4 : 54 ] 68% of them said, it makes me a better person. The final group, final larger group, 66%, said it gives me comfort in times of trouble and sorrow.
- Why do you go to church? Is it to become closer to God? Is it so that your young children have a moral compass? Is it because you need comfort in times of trouble and sorrow?
- Is it to make you a better person? I'm not sure what brought you in this morning. But how would you answer it? Perhaps you're a young child in the room this morning.
- And you're like, I asked mom and dad that exact same question. Why do we go to church? For what purpose do we gather Sunday mornings? Is it even necessary?
- This morning, this is the underlying question that is being answered for us in this text. The spirit-filled church, the church where the Holy Spirit resides, is one that gathers to build one another up.
- [ 6 : 13 ] It wasn't in any of the answers to the survey. But for Paul, this is the primary point he wants to make for us this morning. We gather to build one another up.
- A mature church gathers to build each other up. This is our foundational purpose.
- Well, we've been underway six weeks already in this series. And it's worthwhile to recap at this point because Paul, at the heart of the text this morning, Paul is responding to the primary inquiry that the church in Corinth was making.
- He had spent 18 months there establishing the church. They had all sorts of questions about marriage, about food sacrifice to idols, about spiritual gifts and their utilization.
- They wanted to know what it meant to have true spirituality. And we come to understand that the Corinthians had this belief that true spirituality somehow was tied to the manifestation of one particular spiritual gift, namely the demonstration of speaking in tongues, or in our purposes, an angelic foreign language.
- [ 7 : 37 ] They embraced the church at Corinth, embraced and esteemed those who had the spiritual gift. And they set them apart as if they were somehow superior.
- And the congregation began to divide because there were those who had the gift and those who did not have the gift. The divide of the congregation created dissension, weakened the church.
- The church had become hierarchical of sorts. There were the special and the spiritual. And then there were the others. The plain. The basic.
- The average. And Paul needs to mend this unraveling church. He reminds them that they are one in Christ.
- Though diverse, they are unified under a single spirit. And they live interdependently with one another. Above all, they have all these gifts, but they are to contribute to the well-being of one another.

[ 8 : 36 ] And what governs all of that is the ethic of love. Here in chapter 14, they are to pursue it. They are to zealously go after it.

And with that in mind, he now returns to the original issue. What about tongues? Paul, what about tongues? What about this gift?

It's interesting how Paul goes about this argument. He kind of, I think of sports because I like sports, but he brings, of all the spiritual gifts, he brings two into the ring for a match, a battle of sorts.

It's like pitting two teammates on the same basketball team against each other in a 1v1 match. They're on the same team. They're fighting for the same purpose.

But for their purposes on the court that day, they were going to establish who was better. This is what is taking place in chapter 14. The Corinthians say, well, representing us is the gift of tongues.

[ 9 : 53 ] And Paul says, in my corner, I'm going to grab the gift of prophecy, and we're going to duke it out. Both on the same team. Both are spoken, vocalized gifts.

Both are good gifts from the Spirit. The battleground is in the context of corporate worship. This is when the church assembles, the public gathering of believers.

It is when they come together. It's highlighted in chapter 11, 18, 11, 20, again in 14, 4. But when they come together, this is important to know. In this battle, we are on the same team contending against one another.

And so they have brought forth their fighters. Corinth, the gift of tongues, and Paul, the gift of prophecy.

And the duel unfolds in its way, according to chapter 14. Paul is going to argue, there's a preference for prophesying. And it's going to be followed by, there's a trouble with tongues.

[ 10 : 58 ] And it's going to conclude with this consideration that your mind matters. Your mind matters. Paul is going to say, I prefer prophecy.

Your fighter tongues, there's big trouble with it. And in it all, your mind matters. There is a preference for prophesying. Paul has established the necessity of love.

Love governs the use of all spiritual gifts. And since that is the case, we are to desire all of them. We are to want all of them, according to verse 1.

Pursue love and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. And from these opening verses, Paul just tips his hand and lets you know what he prefers.

I prefer prophesying over tongues. And in these first five verses, he's going to tell us why. He compares them. They begin to exchange blows.

[ 12 : 00 ] Tongues addresses God alone. But prophesying speaks to people, all people, for their upbringing, upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation.

Tongues is this personal conversation, this private dialogue you have with God. It utters mysteries in the spirit. While prophesying is an utterance that builds up one another, encourages and consoles people.

From the outset, Paul wants us to know that when these two go to fight, they have two different audiences. One is toward God, and the other is toward people.

Tongues are direct speech to God. Prophesying is direct speech to people. Not only do they have different audiences, but they also have different beneficiaries.

For the individual engaged in tongues, which is, as they use their gift, it largely only benefits themselves.

[ 13 : 08 ] There is a personal benefit. Their hearts are stirred. Their affection is cultivated. They draw near to God. But while the one who prophesies speaks not on their own benefit, but actually for the benefit of others.

You see it here in verse four. Speaking in tongues builds up oneself, while prophesying builds up the body, the church, and others.

And here we have, in these opening verses, a confrontation to our common thinking. Paul has brought what he believes is the most desirable gift.

Corinthians have proposed what they think is the most special gift. And Paul says, this is how we decide it. The confrontation to our common thinking regarding church.

There's a confrontation to our common thinking regarding church and the worship gathering. In our day and age, when we select churches, we often have this consumer mentality.

[ 14 : 14 ] Probably a product of globalization, Western civilization, all sorts of things. But we have this consumer mentality. We want to consume spirituality. What do I get when I walk into this place?

How does this make me feel when I come into this space? How can I be entertained? How can you keep my attention? What will you do to keep me?

How do I benefit from coming? What do I get all out of this? And strikingly, Paul confronts this attitude from the outset. When you come together in the corporate gathering, it is not primarily the place you ask, what do I get?

No. It's far less about what I get than what I give. It is not a place where we show off our spiritual gifts, flaunt what we have, or our personal spirituality, or even come with this priority of personal benefit.

No. When we gather, it is for the well-being of others. This is not to say there is no personal benefit. Surely there is. But the attitude one walks into these doors on a Sunday morning ought to be this.

[ 15 : 31 ] Sunday morning is far less about what I can get than what I can give. The aim of the corporate gathering is how we can edify and build one another up.

Now, let's be clear. Paul is not denigrating. He's not belittling tongues. According to verse 5, he desires everyone to do it. He likely knows of the personal help that he himself has had being a speaker of tongues in verse 18.

Towards the end of the chapter, we'll find he does not forbid it in verse 39. No, he is saying that when, however, what he is saying that when you come together in Corinth, the most vital thing that takes place is not that there is an eruption of tongues, but that others are built up, edified, and strengthened, it is important for us as a spirit-filled church that we get to grasp, we grasp this, that we, I, you, attend church for the sake of the individual sitting next to you, the person in front of you, the one behind you, for their benefit, we gather to build others up.

This is why what happens at home is very different than what happens here on a Sunday morning. In your private devotion, you could sing songs of praise, you could read lengthy chunks of the Bible, you could be engaged in prayer, you could write and journal, and those are all personally beneficial, but they cannot, will not, do not replace what takes place here.

We gather to build up others, and before we get too far into this sermon, you're probably asking, well, then help me understand what does it mean to prophesy?

[ 17 : 34 ] define it for us. What is it? Does it happen today? Do I do it? Do you do it? Can we do it?

We've already noted a few things. Prophesying is understandable. It's intelligible. It's spoken in the native tongue.

It's speech directed to the benefit of others, particularly for their upbuilding, their encouragement, and consolation. Verse 3. One writer says prophetic speech is just directed towards people, and it strengthens, encourages, and comforts us.

And as you begin to think of prophecy, if you're a student of the Bible, you might think of prophetic figures. You think of an Isaiah. You think of a Jeremiah. You think of an Amos. You think of the oracles that they proclaimed.

And these individuals were people in our Bibles that received the divine word and would foretell the future, particularly, usually, the judgment of the nation, indicting them for failure to follow God.

[ 18 : 41 ] And what they said as prophets was prophecy in the sense that it was true and it was equated to the very words of God. Therefore, infallible.

Therefore, etched in our Bibles, inscripturated, as we say. Some would say the New Testament prophets were the same. It was divinely inspired speech through a messenger that communicates the direct word of God.

Now, in the present-day church, the contemporary church, there's been a huge conversation, ongoing conversation, on what this is. Is it continually valid?

Some of us come from traditions that have asserted that when the Bible was finished, the Apostolic Age concluded these special gifts, the normal operation of these special, supernatural gifts has concluded with it.

Others of us come from traditions that assert that there is no more infallible speech of the Isaiah sort, but of the Corinthian sort, it still goes on.

[ 19 : 53 ] Prophesying continues, a divine word that doesn't carry the full weight of thus says the Lord, but certainly carries these indications that the Spirit of God was still, is still at work.

Interestingly, here, Paul calls the believer to desire these gifts as if they are accessible to the church. These gifts are for the common good as to say they're needed for the health of this body.

Even the Apostle James would write, he would call us to believe in the possible of supernatural healing. And I'm not sure where you lie in this spectrum.

These things stop, these things go, these things, some of us are more cautious, some of us are more open to it. Entire denominations have emerged from the practice of these gifts.

I think of these supernatural gifts as prophesying, speaking in tongues, healing, and the working of miracles. But what is prophesying specifically? I want to note a few things.

[ 21 : 06 ] It's distinct from preaching. There is a tradition where what Paul is saying here is all preaching and I would say that's not it. It can't be preaching because, at least not how Paul is using it, he cannot, he is not calling the whole church to preach.

We know that Paul doesn't hold that view where everyone in the congregation preaches. That can't be what Paul is saying. It's not preaching. So what is it? What is it? And I'm going to concede because as I read a lot on this, you know, when everyone goes to the same definition from one single author when you're doing research, you know, oh, okay, that guy's definition is operative in all sorts of places.

I found this incredibly helpful and many commentaries rely on the definition from Anthony Thistleton, a priest and theologian. He passed away in 2023. And I'm going to read it slowly because it's helpful.

Prophecy, I quote, as a gift of the spirit, combines pastoral insight into the needs of individuals, communities, and situations with the ability to address or speak with a God-given utterance, whether it be longer or shorter, leading to challenge, comfort, judgment, and consolation, ultimately building up the hearer or the addressee.

while the speaker believes that such utterance or discourses come from the Holy Spirit, Thistleton notes, mistakes can be made because believers, including ministers, and prophets remain humanly fallible.

- [ 23 : 02 ] Claims of prophecy must be weighed and tested. So what he is saying is it is a word from the Holy Spirit that addresses the need of an individual for their encouragement, comfort, judgment, or consolation.

It's not an infallible word where that by never airs. So it must be weighed and tested. But it is a consistent word with divinely inspired scriptures.

You see, the utterance that comes from the same spirit is the same spirit that carried along the biblical authors. No words of scriptures, no word of the scriptures come from anyone's interpretation, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

In other words, when one exercises the gift of prophesying, what you will often find is it sounds a lot like the Bible. Why?

Because the same spirit that gives the gift is the same spirit that authored the Bible. And oftentimes, it is taking maybe the vast knowledge of an individual's biblical literacy and producing a word out of that in an appropriate season.

- [ 24 : 24 ] It would not be surprising when the gift of prophecy is exercised that it sounds a lot similar to the words of the Bible. The spirit is the source of both. So how might it look today?

Perhaps even today, you find yourself after the service in a conversation with an individual who had an incredibly difficult week. You have few words to speak to say, oh, I'm sorry, it's been a hard week.

Yet all of a sudden, under spiritual compulsion or supernatural compulsion or even impulse, the spirit brings to your remembrance a thought that you've had about God this whole week.

What may appear as unprepared speech becomes a deep means of comfort and consolation to the one undergoing a difficult week.

There may be another conversation taking place in the lower level. An individual is despairing, despondent, in distress over life. There's hopelessness in their heart.

- [ 25 : 35 ] You listen in silence, unsure of what to say. There are no words that come to your mind. You don't know what to say, often in these difficult situations.

Yet, the spirit brings into remembrance the great hope of the gospel. future glory. The day when all things will be made new and you begin to speak when there were no words prior.

That's how it may look like. In both cases, the prophetic speech is prompted by the spirit for the edification of another. It may come with profundity or plainness.

Regardless, it's given for the building up of another. And this is why Paul prefers prophesy. It builds up the church.

Perhaps if you've read carefully or follow along slowly, you'll see that's the repeated phrase in this whole chapter. He prefers prophesying because it builds up the church.

- [ 26 : 44 ] And secondly, because there's trouble with tongues. There's trouble with tongues. There's trouble in tongues in the corporate gathering.

It can be summarized by the word unintelligibility. Did I even say that right? Unintelligible intelligibility. The concept is found there in verse 9.

So with yourselves, if your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible. The trouble with tongues is that they are not intelligible to the hearer and at times even the speaker, apparently.

To be unintelligible! It has nothing to do with intelligence. Thank God. But it has everything to do with clarity and understandability. It has everything to do with whether or not what is spoken can actually be comprehended.

This is so crucial that Paul provides three separate analogies to try to get this point across. Rarely, I mean, he doesn't do it often.

[ 27 : 49 ] Paul writes, now, Corinthians, imagine, I come to you in verse 6, I come to you speaking in tongues. How will I benefit you?

The answer is you won't benefit us, Paul, unless you bring some revelation, prophecy, or teaching, or knowledge that comes in our common vernacular.

If you come to us speaking in tongues, it will not benefit us. It is the same as if I gave someone a flute or I took hold of a flute, which would be awful, and I come and I don't come and it is the flute.

And I come and I cover the blowholes and I blow and what sound I make, I have no idea because it is a note that it matches no note, produces no coherency, and in the end it's just a painful agitation to the ear because it doesn't produce a note or fall into a melody.

It is worthless and useless. It's completely indiscernible. It would be the same as if you gave me a harp and you simply asked me to start plucking or yanking or pulling or I don't, I think that those are the things that you do with a harp, having no idea how to produce a coherent note.

[ 29 : 17 ] Or let's consider the military application. What if I gave you a bugle and you sounded it not knowing how to make the right sound? Well, this is what happens in a battlefield.

Today we have satellite radio and we have satellite radio and radio communication. That's how our soldiers communicate in war. But in ancient war it was a musical instrument, a bugle.

So the right note would be played and the army would know whether to advance or retreat to move left or move right. Now if I play an indistinct note, how will, how could an army respond?

In the same way, if you use tongues or unintelligible speech, it is simply producing a wasted sound in the ear. No one knows what is being said.

His last illustration grabs hold not of an instrument but of a spoken language. Languages are understandable but they are applicable only when the recipients understand what is being spoken.

[ 30 : 30 ] For our honeymoon, for a year after our marriage, Christy and I had the opportunity to go to Peru. For those of you unaware, Peru is Spanish speaking.

I know nothing in Spanish. Christy has a knack for foreign languages so when we, who we were able to get from place to place and get around.

And there were multiple instances where she would demonstrate proficiency speaking in Spanish with whoever she was speaking with. And whoever she was speaking with would turn to me and start speaking in Spanish thinking that I carried the same proficiency.

I would look at them blankly, dumbfounded. I have no idea what you're saying to me. I have no fluency. And there I would ask Christy, what did this person say?

And I would need an interpreter and a translator. You see, I was a foreigner and the speaker was a foreigner to me because Spanish was unintelligible to me.

[ 31 : 34 ] This was the case for the entirety of our trip until one of the last days we wandered into Lima and there we found our way to a local Chinese restaurant.

And as it had been the case up to that point in the trip, Christy assumed all the spoken duties. As I sat there, I found it quite an experience to order Chinese food in Spanish.

I would tell Christy what I think we should get in English. She would figure it out and order it in Spanish. She needed to interpret it to the local hearer in order for it to make sense.

Then it dawned on me, why don't I just use Chinese? And from that point on, the exchange became more complicated. I was speaking to the waiter in Mandarin.

Christy was speaking to the waiter in Spanish. We were speaking to each other in English. And I think the waiter probably thought we were crazy.

[ 32 : 41 ] You see, and this is Paul's argument. Tongues is foreign.

Nobody understands it. It shouldn't be used in the corporate setting and the way that you're using it, Corinthians.

Now, Paul is not saying the gift should be done away with. He's saying, where you use the gift has to be considered.

And you could hear it, right? Because the Corinthians are saying, okay, Paul, you prefer prophesying. We prefer tongues. And a bunch of us have this gift of tongues. And what's interesting, I mean, because I've read some, but what's interesting about the gift of tongues is it's only mentioned in Corinth.

Like where all the other spiritual gifts are mentioned in 1 Peter or in Ephesians or Romans. Paul never mentions tongues in those places as if it's almost this Corinthian obsession.

[ 33 : 51 ] And you can hear them asking, well then, Paul, if God gave us this gift, what are we supposed to do about it? What am I to do about it? Well, it's, as mentioned, Paul doesn't discredit it.

He doesn't discard it. He actually reemphasizes it again in verse 39. For those that speak in tongues, there is still benefit, great benefit.

Even in modern day literature, there are abundance of testimonies in literature that describe what people would describe, these breakthrough moments, radical deliverance, the stirring of a spirit for greater gospel passion.

And I'm in no position to discredit these claims because the scriptures do attest to some phenomenon like this, right? That in our weakness, what happens?

The spirit himself intercedes with groans that words cannot express. It is conceivable that the spirit erupts within a person to strengthen them in their doubt, to assure them when there's no certainty, to come alongside them in special ways.

[ 35 : 14 ] And Paul concludes these verses exhorting those who speak in tongues. So to do what, though? You have to desire interpretation. Why? We've already seen it. Interpretation is needed to translate the language so that the whole body may be built up.

Yet here in these last verses, he adds something and it goes along the lines of this. I prefer prophesying. There's trouble with your tongues, desire interpretation, but in all of this, remember that your mind matters when you worship.

Now, how much time do I have? Okay. Your mind matters when you worship. So you're stirred up by the spirit in worship, perhaps by tongues or some other ecstatic, elevated speech, but it should never be detached from your mind.

You see that in verse 14, where Paul says, if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, it's stirred, it's lifted, but my mind is unfruitful.

What am I to do? Well, I pray with my spirit and I pray with my mind also. What Paul is saying is there is some, when we engage in worship, there is a danger where our affections are so awakened that we disconnected with anything happening up in here.



[ 37 : 04 ] That it is this hyper-emotional, that it is this hyper-emotionalism, that it is an awakening of our affections in such a way that we lose control and don't consider what is actually taking place in our minds.

The danger of tongues is that when your spirit is stirred and your affections for Christ begin welling up, that you cling. And I do this.

You cling to this emotional high. You cling to this experience-based spirituality. Like I remember these moments in my youth where maybe I was out to camp and I'm bawling on the floor and I have, you know, I've shared with you like I think my conversion moment and I'm sitting in the back of a Masonic temple just weeping, weeping, weeping because the love of God overflowing and I look to those moments and I go, God, I just want to feel that again.

Paul is saying the feeling is not wrong but the feeling disconnected from the mind is useless.

When we walk in on a Sunday we don't check our brains at the door thinking that we only bring our hearts into worship. Paul is here to correct that sentiment. When we gather it requires our spirit and our mind, our heart and our mind.

[ 38 : 36 ] God has given us our rationality so that we love the Lord our God with all of our mind. We gather to sing intelligible words.

We gather to hear his word read. We sit under his word preached. We pray to have his word revealed. This is a reasonable faith and Paul contends that your mind matters when you come on a Sunday.

This is further reason why unintelligible tongues must be accompanied by intelligible interpretation, translation for the benefit of the outsider and the building up of others.

I prefer prophecy because everyone is strengthened. The trouble with tongues is it's self-serving and no one understands what's going on.

And when you get obsessed with it, you actually lose your mind. And that is not the Christian faith. So it begs the question each Sunday that we must answer.

[ 39 : 49 ] What have I done since I've entered into this space that edifies the one in front of me, behind me, next to me?

Have I sung these gospel truths in such a way that edify those around me? I know for some of us, we don't sing beautifully.

That's why they turn off my mic. We don't sing beautifully, in tune, in tone. but it's not about necessarily singing beautifully after you're up here.

But what your neighbor needs from you is that you're singing with sincerity. It may not sound beautiful, but when I watch individuals, young kids, grown-ups, sing with all their heart, edify.

Why do we sing? Because God deserves our praise, but we need to be built up. Do we sing that earnestness?

[ 41 : 02 ] Have I listened well to a person as they shared a burden with me? Have I spoken truly, lovingly, tenderly, and sincerely to the one who needs a word of encouragement or hope?

Have I received or welcomed the visitor as Christ has welcomed me with interest, care, and compassion? Have I contributed to the edification of the body, built up its strength, offered consolation to the hurting, so that when my brother or when my sister walks out of this space, they face the world Monday morning stronger because they belong here?

we gather to build up one another, fulfilling the very purposes that God intended for us at Christ Church Chicago.

That's how the world knows we are a spirit-filled church. Oh, Father, we thank you for your word that speaks sensibly to us.

That we are to desire all the gifts, the greater gifts, and we are to pursue love. And as we walk into this space with all sorts of gifts and abilities and spiritual talents, would you make us a sensitive congregation, aware of the needs of one another, that we understand we come to build up, but it also implies that we come to be built up, that there is something accomplished in this room that I cannot receive in my living room, in my bedroom, in my study, that God give you a part of the creation only as your people.

[ 43 : 17 ]    Some benefit to be our help, we pray. Yes, it stands for Jesus' name.