

1 Corinthians 12:27–30

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: 27 July 2025

Preacher: David Helm

[0 : 00] Today's passage comes from the book of Corinthians chapter 12 verses 27 to 31. Third, teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?

But earnestly desire the higher gifts, and I will show you a still more excellent way. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated.

Reach for the sky.

I hope you can think 1995, the voice of Tom Hanks giving us Woody, a stuffed toy that belonged to Andy, in that Pixar inaugural first fully computer-generated feature film toy story.

[1 : 51] Woody was this floppy, stuffed, pull-string toy, sheriff of Andy's room, and when you pulled the string, you'd hear, reach for the sky.

It was a line indicating in that world that he'd caught you. It was Hollywood's early version of hands up. You're under arrest.

Your actions have violated and broken the social fabric of the world as it was to be. In fact, when he met Buzz Lightyear, that initial contrarian who sought to take Andy's heart, reach for the sky, was in full force in Woody's heart.

Yeah, Woody. He came to my mind this week as I tried to crack the problematic meaning of verse 31.

Put your eyes on it with me. This word from Paul in what was otherwise a descriptive paragraph.

[3 : 19] We find this prescriptive moment. But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

What is Paul saying here? What is the tone of his voice?

Is Paul simply emulating that voice of an all-affirming life coach who wants to pull the string of your aspirations as though the contest had not yet begun?

Is this the voice of a coach who says, I want us to enter into the coming year possessing the belief that we can rise to heights unknown, unconsidered?

Is this the voice of, let's go reach for the stars? Or given what we know of the divisions in this team Corinth, given what we know of the lawsuits between church members, given what we know of the bald-faced fact that their church gatherings, according to Paul, were doing more harm than good, and perhaps most importantly, given his sense of their over-the-top view on tongues as the ultimate gift to be coveted, are we perhaps to interpret the meaning of verse 31 this way?

[4 : 54] Reach for the sky. You know, those who work in communication say that the words that you hear only communicate 7% of the meaning you're to take.

That's 93% then given to the tone of voice, given to the relational context in which these words are spoken, given the non-verbal cues.

All these things go into actually understanding what's here. Well, are we then listening to Paul with unbounding aspiration, and you merely come today for me to tell you, you know what?

Let's have a great year. Let's reach high for the higher things. Let's go for the stars.

Or is Paul looking at us and saying, I've got you red-handed. The social fabric has been broken.

[6 : 12] Your aspirations have been too low. You've settled for that which is less and not best. And I want to talk to you about it in these verses.

Are we hearing Woody's voice that pulls on the conscience of a compromised people? I hope you're kind of wondering, which is it?

I suppose if we were in a Sunday school class together, I'd ask you to turn to somebody. Now, don't do it now, but I'd ask you to turn to somebody next to you or just in front of you or behind you and say, so which do you think it is and why?

But this is a sermon. So let me tell you what I am opting for and the reasons behind it. You might guess I'm opting for verse 31 to be understood in the sense that you are to earnestly desire higher gifts in the context of reach for the sky.

Come on, church. You're better than this. I opt for a tone of voice where he's kind of caught the church plant that he planted red handed.

[7 : 28] They've broken the social fabric of their life together. And he's saying, but earnestly desire the higher gifts, the better things, the things that you haven't settled for.

Well, there's some reasons for it. And hopefully if you're a non-Christian listening to me right now, you're like, wow, this might actually intrigue me because maybe I've got something in common with Paul.

I mean, finally, we get an apostle who calls the church out on aspirations that are too self-serving, too petty minded, too divisively oriented, too much in the realm of that doesn't seem to match to Jesus you talk about.

But if you're if you're if you're thinking about that as you look at the Christian church, then then I hope you're opting for my view. Yeah. The church needs to hear.

Yes. There's things higher and greater and better. That you need to discover. So what are the reasons that might make us think that way?

[8 : 44] It seems to me that this view then makes best sense of verse 28, at least the first part of it. Can you look at that again with me? Verse 28 reads, and God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers.

Now, just think of understanding what he's saying there. He's just not in a nondescript way instructing you as though it's a manual on church order and things.

No, he's he's saying let's be clear. It's apostles first, prophets second, teachers third. In other words, church, the gift that you desire to elevate most in their context tongues.

I want you to know it's not even among the top three. Doesn't make the primary list of the gifts that God gave to establish the church.

And interestingly, these words particularly are akin more to offices or responsibilities given to some to get the church off the ground in the apostolic age, even more so than they are just charismatic like gifts that are distributed all around.

[10 : 08] I mean, the apostles is a set number, those 12, but then beyond that, those who had seen the resurrected Lord. They've come, they've gone. The prophets, not the Old Testament prophets that could always say, thus saith the Lord.

But that moment in history where you had prophetic things happening before the formation of the canon, which gives us God's word complete where things were being said.

And even in those things, they had to be tested. And there was a sense of I'm not sure whether God's speaking through you or not, but all of these things are there. And then teachers.

In other words, I think Paul is saying, look, you're all up in arms on on tongues, but your gift isn't in the top three. I mean, think about Ephesians four with me, where these things are listed by Paul elsewhere.

I'm looking at verse seven through 11. By grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. And then he quotes Psalm 68.

[11 : 14] Therefore, it says, when he ascended on high, he led a host of captives and gave gifts to men. But those gifts are not the gifts of just charismatically distributed things that help the body.

They were more than that. Take a look at verse 11. And he gave, that is the gift that he gave to the church in fulfillment of the prophetic scriptures in Psalm 68, are apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers.

And they were the ones to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. These three, he's saying, these three are the foundational things in church life. The apostolic witness, the prophetic discourse, and the teaching that accords with both.

So that's what the church is built on. So then, reach for the sky, church.

Come on. You're better than this. Now, what does that mean for us? And we got to get this right.

[12 : 25] The body of which we are all members. Take a look back at verse 27. Now, you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. The body, the family of God, of which we are all members, didn't start with us.

Didn't begin with you. It never depended on us.

It won't depend on you. We emerge from the foundational teaching given to us by the apostles in the prophetic record as set down and taught accurately and only that.

That's first. That's as high as it gets. Just even thinking about it, God gifted the church with offices upon which the people of God would depend.

These apostles, the twelve, these prophets distinct from Old Testament prophets who simply said, thus saith the Lord and it was true, but prophetically gifted no less to share a word that was to be tested.

[13 : 55] These teachers who hold to the apostolic gospel of things of first importance that Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures, that he was raised on the third day, according to the scriptures, that forgiveness of sins is the proclaim to all people in his name, that the primary mission of the church is the proclamation of this good news, that your sins can be forgiven through Christ.

That's first. That's primary. That's a leader. We don't do anything without it. We don't do anything without it. We don't do anything without it. And that should be meaningful not only to those of us who find ourselves emphasizing lesser things.

lesser things, you should come in here week by week and bring your friends and family, I think, under a trusted conviction that this place will do its best to guard your relationships in ways that attempt to give you, in our fallible voice, a clear understanding of what God has done and how he builds his people. And that should be good if you're not a Christian. Come on, let's get real. If you're not a Christian listening to me today, it's one thing for you to continue to go on dismissing the Christian message because of all of the conflict you see in church life or all of the abuses you see or even purportedly gifted people on TV or otherwise on our own streets who are here to manipulate you, take from you, are divisive imposters in a sense. It's one thing for you to reject the Christian message based upon what you see, but it's another thing for you to reject the message without actually looking at the apostolic message and its gospel and Jesus himself.

And if you've never done that, I invite you to do that with us over the coming weeks. Explore for yourself their message because we're built on that foundation.

Spirit-filled Christians, spirit-filled churches rise above their self-serving desires. They know they're not first or second or even third. But that's not all. There is more here to indicate that Paul had caught them off guard, that he's really trying to correctively work with them. Take a look at 28b, a second support to how we understand verse 31. The second half of 28 reads this way, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. It's almost as if he's saying, now furthermore, beyond those top three, the gift of tongues which you desire to elevate is listed last among the and then. Do you see it there? Last in line, even in what is an incomplete list of gifts that are given to the church.

[17 : 30] So let me sit on this for a minute because we're four weeks into the series and you're seeing this word tongues again. So we ought to at least stop long enough to say, do we even have an understanding of what we're talking about here? So let me give you an early look because we're going to roll back on this, especially when we get into chapter 14. What is this gift of tongues?

First, it is to be distinguished from the gift of preaching. Preaching is the public proclamation of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, in fulfillment of the promises that have been put forward in the scriptures. So preaching, understood properly, is expository in nature. It's pulling out from the truth of God's revealed record, that which he has done and what it means for us today. That's preaching. That's not tongues. It's also to be distinguished from the gift of prophecy. You keep coming over the next few weeks, you'll see this really clearly in chapter 14. But tongues is not simply prophetic discourse. Prophecy is, in one sense, a spontaneous, I believe, speaking gift that edifies the church in accordance with the truth that he's given to us in his word. That's to be distinguished from tongues. So what is tongues? If not preaching and not strictly prophesying, I think tongues, rightly understood, is praising God in spoken tongue and offering prayers to him concerning the mighty works that he has done. And it seems, as you come back next week, the opening line of 13 actually goes a little forward and says, if I speak in the tongues of men, and then it says, and of angels, there seems to be two kinds of tongues, human languages, heavenly languages, unlearned by the one who's speaking, but suddenly overcome with the capacity to communicate in a human language, the praise of God. And evidently, in Acts 2, a human language, because all those people that were gathered at Pentecost are like, what is going on? I'm hearing this guy over here in my native tongue. I understand what he's saying, human language, while someone else is going, well, I'm not from where you live, but I'm from over here.

We speak a different language, but I'm hearing praises going up concerning the mighty works of God, too. That also seems to happen in the Corinthian context, where there were moments where somebody would speak a word, but only if we've got interpretation to follow. But generally, if you look at chapter 14 and verse 2 of our book, for the one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men, but to God. See, it's directed up, not out. Or take a look at verse 4. The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. The gift of tongues is God's gift to some that strengthens their own faith. You ever do that? You ever like be praising God and your praise elevates your praise and you are flourishing in the gift that he gave you to pray and praise? Yeah, this is what goes on.

Take a look over in verse 14 of the same chapter. For if I pray, there's prayer in tongue, tongues by prayer. My spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit.

[22 : 00] I will pray with my mind also. I will sing praise. There's praise. Praise with my spirit, but I will also do so with my mind. There is, according to the scriptures, a gift of praise and prayers concerning the mighty works of God that actually increases and serves your own faith and growth and development. Some people want to know, is it still going on? Well, healings do happen.

God can do what he wants. And healing ought to be prayed for. And if you need healing, the Bible tells us how you approach the elders and ask for that prayer. You need to know, you know, I come from a strange family in the sense that half of my lineage is four square Pentecostalism and half of them, well, they move themselves as far toward Presbyterianism and Roman Catholicism as they can. And I'm standing there in the middle asking these questions. But I can tell you that tongues as a prayer language, perhaps a heavenly language, not human, is something that I have been witness to among individuals that I not only know well, but love and have no sense in my mind that they are trying to be manipulative. In fact, it's a prayer language that is best exercised even in this letter in your own home, because when you come to church, you kind of control that thing because here we do stuff that actually serves other people. I'm not here just for my own praise.

Spirit-filled Christians rise above their self-serving desires. That's what we take from this. The tongues thing, which they wanted to elevate, is for him not the main thing.

So, your personal, intimate relationship with God through prayer and praise, through a gift that God has given to you, for you to grow and develop and love him more and more. There's one final support to taking verse 31 and that's what Paul is trying to say. It's not merely that he's caught them red-handed, aiming too low, and he wants to lift their gaze because they're not even in the top three. It's not even that their gift is listed last among an incomplete list. But take a look again here. One final support for the arresting nature of what Paul is trying to say in verse 31. I find it in verse 29 and 30. Let me read that for you.

Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? That's a list of rhetorical questions.

[25 : 21] Yes. That's like you already know the answer to this. Almost like why am I even asking this? So, I'm talking to a congregation, says Paul, that some have so fallen in love with their particular gift that evangelistically they think everyone ought to have it. In fact, I'm not sure you're legit if you don't have it. And so Paul says, what are you talking about? Are all this or all that? All people don't get that. That's not the way God works. And I've been subject to this too. Growing up as a boy, oh I remember it well. Being on my knees at our family reunion with my aunts, great aunts playing that auto harp. My great uncle playing that accordion. My grandfather on the grand piano. The singing, the endless hours of singing and praising and dancing, you know, with big skirts going around the room. And that's my history. You know what I'm talking about. I'm sitting there with my basketball, asking my dad, when can I go outside? I'm hearing all these languages going on. I had no clue what was happening. Till my great aunt pulls me over, sits me down in the middle of the room, gets me on my knees and all my family suddenly is on my head and they're asking God to give me this gift because in their mind, their gift is the gift everyone ought to be gifted with. And they went and they went and they went and me and my basketball stood there. And I didn't get the gift. Just didn't get it. But the word here is, hey, not everyone gets all this stuff. Let God do with individuals what he wants to do.

To increase and grow their relationship with him. In fact, he barely gave me English. Now and only now does verse 31 come into full light. In light of the fact that there's a top three and nobody in that church had it. In light of the fact that their top thing is at the end of the list. In light of the fact that I've asked a lot of questions of you and you know the answer. Not everyone's supposed to have this.

In light of all that, now we hear verse 31. But contrast, prescription. But what do I really want from you?

Earnestly desire the higher gifts. Reach for the sky. I've got you. You're complicit. The social fabric of the church is breaking down.

And you need to desire things above the things that you value. You know that word desire, earnestly desire. I love it. At times, kind of in a wooden way. It's like things that are boiling up. He's like, I want you to get, I want you to get heated on the right things.

[28 : 32] I want you to be like a heat-seeking missile. Not to make everyone else conform to what you think is right, but I want you to elevate to the gifts that you know. Speak. Just give me five words when you come on Sunday, he says, that help somebody else. Oh, it would be better, he says, than a thousand that nobody can be helped by. Give me one thing you do when you meet a congregant today who has a need, and if you're not able to speak to them, you're able to serve them in a way. Give me a whole congregation that comes to church wondering, what can I say and who can I serve? Oh, give me those higher things.

That's where he's moving. Rise above it, this text says. Reach higher than you're reaching, this text says. You can do better than this, your text says. Desire something greater than what you're settling for, this text says. The greatest gifts are those that serve others, not those that serve yourself.

And so a Spirit-filled church learns to rise above self-serving desires. We arrive each and every week, not merely thinking, man, I got to get my praise on. And if I don't get my praise or I don't feel my praise here, I'm going somewhere else. I got to get my prayer on. Whoever's doing that thing over there, if they don't do it in the way that I like to pray, I'm not staying with them. No, no, no. All that's there and important. Praise and prayer are critical. But the real critical thing is, do you enter in that outer door and just say a simple prayer? Lord, I'm available. I'm available.

Can I say something to help someone? Lord, lead me. By your Spirit, I'm available. Lord, can I serve someone today? If so, put the need right in front of me in a clear way where I can't escape. When that happens, wow, the place takes off. People are utilizing the particular gifts God has given to them. They're arriving not looking for a feeling that finds its fulfillment in whether they were emotionally brought to a moment of ecstatic praise. No, they arrive this and every morning trying to find a way to say and to serve the body of Christ. And even then, even when it's all clicking, even when you're like, wow, what a church gifted and giving. He says here at the end, oh, and by the way, even when you get it all, well, hold on. I'm going to show you still a more excellent way. And while I'd love to say a few things on that now, it would mean jumping in the next week's message and stepping on my brother who's going to deliver.

[31 : 52] So let's shut this down. A Spirit-filled church, Spirit-filled Christians rise above self-serving desires. They express thanks to God for the apostolic prophetic teaching word given to us in the scriptures.

They elevate that above all else. They come to church wanting to hear His voice from that word. The Spirit-filled church, Spirit-filled Christians rise above self-seeking desires, even in regard to how they view their own place.

They humble themselves in the sight of others, not merely seeking to situate themselves at some higher level on a list. The Spirit-filled church, Spirit-filled Christians know the answer to the rhetorical questions of do you not know this stuff.

The Spirit-filled Christians know the truth. They say, God deals with all of us uniquely and differently and individually. Therefore, you give yourself to one another and they give themselves to you. And when that happens, well, I think there's no need for Woody's string to be pulled.

Instead, we lift up our hands and give thanks for having been taught that we can do better than this.

[33 : 23] Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for this summer series in these three chapters that instruct us, correct us, love us, speak to us, and as we give ourselves week by week to understanding it, I pray that Christians and non-Christians alike in our midst would wrestle with their own life and transformative changes or behavioral commitments that demonstrate we're learning the lessons to be Spirit-filled.

We give ourselves to you in Jesus' name. Amen. Let's stand for our closing hymn.