

Something to excel at

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[0:00] We're on page 1155, and we're reading from 1 Corinthians, chapter 14, verses 1 to 25.

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?

[1:24] 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, you will get ready for battle. 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 for the power to interpret. For if I pray in a tongue with my spirit, my spirit prays.

[2:32] But my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also 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.

Nonetheless, in church, I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others than 10,000 words in a tongue. Brothers, do not be children in your thinking.

Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. In the law it is written, by a people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.

[3:47] Thus, tongues are a sign not for believers, but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers, but for believers.

If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?

But if all prophecy and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all he is called to account by all. By all the secrets of his heart are disclosed.

And so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. Thanks very much indeed for reading so clearly for us.

Now, we prayed already, so do please keep 1 Corinthians chapter 14 open on page 1156. And I want to begin this morning by asking a question.

[5:02] It's a question for the regulars. Do you think God is pleased with our church services here at Grace Church Dulwich? Why not just turn to your neighbor and discuss that if you're here as a visitor?

Then I want to ask the question, what would a service be that was pleasing to God? What would it be like? Hopefully that's begun to get us thinking, because the question which 1 Corinthians 14 answers for us is what makes a good church service?

One that God is pleased with. Whether you're here this morning looking in on the Christian faith, or whether you're a committed Christian already, you'll be only too aware there are loads of different churches around the place, all offering different sorts of services, different kinds of experience. Those going off to university in a couple of months' time, you're going to have to make a decision about which church to go to. But what makes a good one? What is a good church experience? What is a poor or bad church experience? Now, I think it's easy to miss the fact that that is the big question of 1 Corinthians 14.

[6:11] For some, I think we miss it, because the Apostle Paul mentions two spiritual gifts in particular, the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy. And immediately, we have a whole raft of questions that we want answers to, and therefore we miss the main thing that Paul is saying.

For others, I think it's because the gifts of tongues and the gifts of prophecy, they're unfamiliar, they sound a little bit strange perhaps, and we find it difficult really to engage with what Paul is saying here in this chapter.

So what's going on in 1 Corinthians 14? Well, we've seen over the last few weeks as we've gone through the letter, we've seen that the church in Corinth was not a model church. So back to chapter 11, verse 17, where the Apostle Paul says, when you come together, it is not for the better, but for the worse.

In other words, your church meetings, your church services, do more harm than good. Then on to today's passage, chapter 14, verse 20, Paul says, brothers, do not be children in your thinking. In other words, here is a church, they're behaving like a bunch of children. Which means, of course, it's always unfortunate when Christians say, as sometimes Christians do say, that if only the church today could be more like the church was in Corinth, then we'd be more authentic.

[7:32] Okay, now that is just plain wrong. Instead, remember, will you, how we saw in chapter 12, that the Corinthians pursued what we call the way of gifts, where impressive, upfront spiritual gifts, and in particular, the gift of tongues, was the mark of Christian maturity.

Leaving everyone else, of course, who didn't have that particular gift, feeling like second-class Christians. And so Paul says, chapter 12, verse 31, instead of the way of gifts, I'm going to show you a more excellent way, and that is the way of love.

That is chapter 13. And now in chapter 14, Paul applies that principle of love, teaching us what a church service looks like, one that pleases God.

And in short, it is one that is shaped by a love for others. Well, you say, what does that look like? Well, that is what chapter 14 unpacks.

We're looking at chapter 14 both this week and next week, but for this week, you'll see an outline there on the back of the service sheet, which would be helpful for you to follow, as well, of course, with an open Bible. So first of all, building up others, not yourself.

[8:44] Have a look at verses 1 to 3. 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. Now, do you remember those spot-the-difference pictures? I love spot-the-difference competitions, where you have two similar pictures, and you've got to spot the sort of differences between picture A and picture B, and the guy in picture B is only wearing one sock, and the dog next to him doesn't have a collar, and all that kind of stuff.

And that is really what the Apostle Paul is doing here with these two gifts, the gifts of prophecy and the gift of tongues. He's saying let's spot the difference in terms of how useful they are.

By the end of the chapter, he'll be saying there's really very little place for tongues in church gatherings, whereas prophecy is very valuable indeed.

And the important thing is not so much spotting the differences between them, but the principles which Paul uses to evaluate the relative worth and value of each one, to teach us, in other words, what is and isn't important in church life.

[10:08] Now, it's not easy to work out precisely what the gifts of prophecy in tongues were, but verses 2 and 3 give us a summary. We'll be thinking more about precisely what prophecy was next week. So, the gift of tongues.

It may be the gift of real but unlearned human languages, such as we have in Acts chapter 2, which, by the way, is the only other place in the New Testament where the gift of tongues is mentioned, or it may be an unknown sort of spiritual language, which doesn't correspond to any known human language.

I don't think it particularly matters for our purpose, which it is, but do notice in verses 2 and 3 that tongues is a form of prayer or singing addressed to God that is not intelligible.

Okay? It can't be understood. Whereas the gift of prophecy, well, that's less well defined, but we certainly see the effects of it, don't we, in verse 3. What does it do? It builds up, it encourages, it consoles, it comforts, because it is intelligible.

It is understandable. But notice it is the outcome which is so vital to what Paul is saying. Verse 4, the one who speaks in the tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.

[11:21] We saw last week that love is essential, which means that in church gathering, we should particularly value those gifts which build up each other. Verse 5, 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, Paul is not saying here that he wants everyone to speak in tongues.

After all, in chapter 7, verse 7, he employed exactly the same phrase to marriage. He said, I wish everyone was single. Okay, so he's not saying that. It's simply a figure of speech, isn't it, by which he's making the point that however important you think the gift of tongues is, actually the gift of prophecy is far more important because it builds up the whole church.

Indeed, I wonder if you noticed, as Sue read the passage for us, how that phrase, building up and build up. It runs like a seam throughout this whole chapter. So it's there, isn't it, in verse 4.

Builds up the church, verse 5. Built up. Then over the page, verse 12. Building up the church, verse 17. Built up. Verse 26.

[12:35] Building up. In other words, you see, the Corinthians have missed the point. Church is not about building yourself up. It's about building others up.

There was a marvelous TripAdvisor review printed in the paper recently from a disgruntled tourist complaining about their trip up, Ben Nevis. I wonder if you may have seen it in the paper.

And these are some of the things they wrote on TripAdvisor. I don't know if you've been up Ben Nevis. It's the tallest mountain in the UK. And this is what they wrote. Very steep and too high. It took almost a full day.

It went on for far too long. The views at the top were non-existent because of the clouds. And at the top, there were no facilities, not even a toilet. As if there was going to be a Jamie Oliver restaurant perched at the top of Ben Nevis.

What's worse, we then had to go down again. Well, you might say, that is to entirely miss the point, isn't it, as to why you might climb Ben Nevis. And you see, the Corinthians have missed the point of church.

[13:42] It's not to feel good about yourself and build yourself up. It is to build up others. You see, here's the question. Here's the fork in the road, if you like. Do you want church to benefit you and to make you look good and feel good?

In which case, says Paul, tongues wins. Or do you want church to benefit others? To be about serving and building up others, in which case, prophecy wins.

That is the question. Who is church for? Now, I think we all struggle with this, don't we? Because we live in an entitlement culture, in a rights culture, obsessed by what my rights are, in a be good to yourself culture.

So here are two applications before we move on. First of all, why did you come to church today?

Well, perhaps different answers, I guess, but perhaps I felt like it. I was on the rotor, I had to.

It was my job, I had to. I had nothing else in the diary. I came to spend time with friends who will make me feel good about myself. Whereas a mark of the Spirit's work is that we come to build up others, to serve others, to contribute.

[14:55] Perhaps actually you've come this morning and frankly, you're feeling exhausted. You woke up feeling exhausted, frustrated, life hasn't been going well over the last few days. You've got far too much on your plate.

But actually, you came to serve and to build up others, driven by the love of God and the love of others. That, you see, is the Holy Spirit at work.

Second application, we mustn't expect everything in church to be as we would like it. Take the choice of songs. Marcus Evans chooses the songs, he does a good job.

He chooses a variety of songs because we are a variety of people. Some like newer songs, some like older songs. Now, my assumption is that all of us sing the songs we enjoy really well.

Okay? That's my assumption. But actually, once we've grasped that church is about building others up, then I take it we'll also sing the songs we don't particularly enjoy, which aren't our favorites, really well also.

[16:00] also. When I was a student, I went to a largely student church, but they didn't only sing the modern songs which we all loved, and I think some of us perhaps thought it was all a bit dull.

But in fact, I think the church leadership were very wise, you see, because they were preparing us for life after university in the ordinary local church where there would be a variety of people and a variety, therefore, of songs.

In other words, they were training us, you see, not to go to church for what I get out of it, but training us instead to go to church to serve others and to benefit others.

Wasn't that a wise thing to do? And of course, in our arrogance, in our late teens and early 20s, we thought it was rather dull, but actually a very wise thing to do. So building up others, not yourself.

Secondly, building up others demands intelligibility. In other words, understanding. Have a look at 1 Corinthians chapter 14, verse 6.

[17:04] 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?

Tongues by themselves cannot be understood, whereas a clear word of revelation, knowledge, prophecy, or teaching, and once again, as we said two weeks ago, it's hard to understand and to tie down exactly what some of these things were is more helpful because they are intelligible and can be understood.

And Paul gives two illustrations here. First of all, verse 7, on music. Intelligibility is crucial in music, verse 7. If even lifeless instruments such as the flute or the harp do not give a distinct note, how will anyone know what is played?

Now, I'm going to illustrate this with Warren's help. Okay, so Warren's going to pick up his instruments and I've had a lesson on playing the flute.

It lasted a minute and it was this morning. So, shall we see, how's this going to go? Can you hear it? It's actually pretty indistinct.

[18:16] I think, I did manage to get a little bit of a note earlier on this morning with Hannah's help, but it was, so it's like, you could hear it but it was pretty indistinct. Now, compare and contrast.

And you see, immediately, they are, see, immediately, you hear the music, don't you?

It's clear and you know what you're meant to be doing. It's the same in battle, verse 8. Warren, thank you very much indeed. Verse 8, and if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready

for battle?

I don't think we'll try and illustrate that one. So then, what are the implications for the gift of tongues? Well, verse 9, say with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said?

Verse 12, say with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church. Perhaps the Corinthians thought the gift of tongues was better precisely because it couldn't be understood.

[19:30] Perhaps it seemed more spiritual. Perhaps they thought that that would give the impression that God was more present in some way. But no, prophecy is more valuable because it is intelligible and therefore it builds up.

Now, churches can get this very wrong, sadly. So, at one end of the spectrum is the Latin Mass in the Roman Catholic Church which no one can follow because it's in an ancient language.

In other churches, services are meaningless because of the rituals, pomp, and ceremony that no one understands. In some charismatic and Pentecostal churches, it's the unrestricted use of tongues which no one can understand.

In still others, it's preaching that is unintelligible. C.H. Spurgeon, the 19th century minister of the Metropolitan Tabernacle at the Elephant and Castle, criticized sermons which he said fed the giraffes, you see, but not the sheep.

In other words, sermons that were unintelligible and not useful for most of those who were listening. Or just think of our songs. Are the words intelligible? If not, we either shouldn't be singing them or we need to explain what they mean.

[20:44] Likewise, the liturgy, the confessions, the creeds. It's why we use a good modern translation of the Bible so that it's intelligible. It's why, as those leading services, we try and explain what is happening in a way that is easily understood and try to avoid using Christian jargon because building up demands intelligibility and understanding.

Thirdly, building up others, engages the mind. Verse 13, therefore, one who speaks in the tongue should pray for the power to interpret.

Tongues need to be interpreted. Indeed, look over to verse 28 where Paul says, if there's no interpretation, you should remain silent. Verse 28, if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God.

because, you see, the mind should be engaged. Back to verse 14. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.

What am I to do? I'll pray with my spirit, but I'll pray with my mind also. I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.

[22:00] You see, when we disengage our minds in church, that is not a mark of being more spiritual, it is actually a mark of being less spiritual. Which is not to say that church should be academic and intellectual, of course not, but we should be engaging our minds.

So you see, where does that leave tongues and prophecy? Well, have a look at verse 18. Paul says, I thank God I speak in tongues more than all of you. Paul has the gift of tongues. He says, it is a good gift.

But, verse 19, nevertheless, in church, I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others than 10,000 words in a tongue.

He doesn't forbid tongues in a church gathering, verse 39, do not forbid speaking in tongues. He doesn't completely rule out the possibility, but notice he says it should be extremely limited.

Which, of course, is a sadness when churches divide around the issue of tongues and speaking in tongues because it's of such small importance in the corporate life of the church together.

[23:14] In other words, you see, we are not to think of our corporate life as a church when we're all together like this, simply as an extension of our personal individual Christian lives.

Just as Paul says, the gift of tongues is a good gift which he uses in private, but in the church gathering he says, look, there are virtually no circumstances in which he will do so. Now that's important, of course, because we all have a huge variety, don't we, amongst us in this room of

personal experiences in the Christian life.

There will be some of us who speak in tongues in private, there will be some who don't. But we mustn't then kind of map our personal Christian experience onto what happens when we gather corporately all together like this.

Now I think we recognize that in other areas. So for example, when we have people praying up front, I take it people don't pray up front on a Sunday morning in the way that they would pray on their own.

They kind of stand up the front, don't they? They say we're going to pray for these various areas. I take it they don't do that when they're praying on their own. They do it to help us all to follow. They tend to pray shorter prayers. Again, so we can all follow.

[24:22] They say amen at the end of each one. I take it they don't pray. They may do, but they may not do like that on their own. You see, not mapping what we do in our own personal Christian lives necessarily onto the whole church gathering.

So what makes a good church service? It's not about creating an experience. It's about engaging the minds. Now, of course, as we sing God's praises, as we pray, as we hear God's word, as the Holy Spirit convicts us of the truth, of course that is all experiential.

There's something wrong if we are unmoved at the level of our emotions, if we're not engaging with God with what Paul calls our spirits.

But sadly, there are churches which deliberately seek to create an experience, and often at the expense of engaging the mind. It might be the sort of high church service with all the bells and smells, which sends a shiver down the spine.

Or it might be the kind of church someone was telling me about the other day, a large church in central London, where he was shocked by the special effect lighting and all the smoke which was swirling around at the front. You see, all designed to create an experience, and to manufacture an experience, as if it's when the hairs stand up on the back of my head that that's when actually I'm really experiencing God.

[25:46] Building up others engages the mind. And fourthly and finally, building up others has the outsider in view. Did you notice that in verse 16? Paul's assumption is that outsiders, unbelievers, are present in the church gathering, verse 16.

Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say amen to your thanksgiving when he doesn't know what you are saying? Which is another reason why there's very little space for tongues in church.

church? Now, those who are in growth groups, you'll remember this rather curious quote from Isaiah, from Isaiah 28 in the Old Testament in verse 21. In the law it is written, by people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.

And you'll remember how God's people wouldn't listen to God's voice. They wouldn't listen to the prophet Isaiah. And so God's answer to them is, okay, you will have to listen instead to strange tongues and the lips of foreigners.

And that is precisely what happened. In 800 BC, the nation of Assyria invaded God's people and they experienced the judgment of God. Well, you say that feels like a long way from Corinth.

[26:59] But, verse 23, if therefore the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?

Perhaps the Corinthians thought that visitors would be impressed by the gift of tongues, perhaps to show how in touch they were with spiritual power and spiritual reality. But actually, Paul says, quite the reverse.

They'll think you're mad. Tongues will drive people away, their hearts hardened, confirmed under the judgment of God. Whereas prophecy is very different.

It's intelligible. It does good for outsiders. Verse 24, but if all prophesy and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all. He is called to account.

The secrets of his heart are disclosed and so falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. There's such a huge gulf, you see, isn't there, between where the Christian believer is and where the unbeliever is.

[28:06] And we need to be thinking all the time as a church, does this make sense? Does what we're doing Sunday by Sunday make sense to outsiders as they come in?

One of the questions I most often ask about Grace Church is this, is Grace Church a happy, clappy church? Which I think means something like, I think people mean by it, is it one of those churches which is just noise, which won't make sense to me, which really is bordering on madness. Because if it is, that's not the kind of church I want to go to. Do you see how the experience of church can either harden people's hearts or it can soften people's hearts, those who don't yet belong to the Lord Jesus?

Now we need to be clear that church meets primarily for believers, so we mustn't dumb everything down for the sake of the unbelievers who are present. We want to work hard at building up believers, at the same time making clear sense to those here who are not believers.

And I hope you're here this morning, and if you're looking in on the Christian faith, I very much hope that has been and is your experience of Grace Church. In other words, that you can see that we are in our right minds, and that we're not whipping up emotions.

[29:24] And that actually there's nothing that really makes you feel uncomfortable, except that is for hearing God's word, which always makes all of us feel uncomfortable.

Not, of course, that we expect you to agree with everything God says in the Bible, but we do hope and we do pray that you will have a growing conviction of the truth, as the Apostle Paul says here in verse 24, that there is indeed a day of accountability, that there is indeed a day of judgment, and that one day you might even come to put your trust in the Lord Jesus for yourself.

And it's wonderful to have Farouk and Fatima here this morning who are living examples of that. Let's summarize. Church is about building up others, not ourselves.

That is the kind of church that God is pleased with. And therefore, you see, our church gatherings like this on a Sunday should give prominence and airtime to those gifts and those things in direct proportion to how they're going to build the church, how useful they are.

It means saying no to some things or we'll just have it very occasionally, as Paul says here, to the gift of tongues, and giving much more prominence to other things as he does here to the gift of prophecy.

[30:44] Just imagine for a moment that half the people at Grace Church have the gift of playing the violin. And we're all saying, look, we all have this gift. Please could we all be playing the violin every Sunday?

Now, what would we say to that? Well, I guess we'd have to say no, wouldn't we, to a lot of the 50. And we'd probably end up saying, well, it's wonderful that you have the gift of playing the violin. We'll probably just have two or three playing.

And then actually the others, it would be much better in terms of building up the whole church if you were able to serve in some other way. In other words, you see, Paul is not simply saying in 1 Corinthians 12 to 14, use your gifts, whatever they are, chapter 12, and use your gifts in love to build up others, chapter 13, whatever they are.

Now, he's saying the principle of love means there will be some gifts which get less air time on a Sunday gathering, other gifts that get more air time, all depending on whether or not they build others up in terms of being intelligible, engaging the mind with the outsider in view.

Now, I'm going to pray. We normally have questions at Grace Church on a Sunday morning. I think we won't do that today. I think mainly because this is very much the first of two talks on 1 Corinthians 14.

[32:11] And in a sense, next week's talk is really the second half of this week's talk. So I think if we had a question time, I can imagine everyone being very frustrated because all I'd end up saying would be come back next week.

Okay? So we're not going to have a question time, which gets me off the hook for today. But bring your questions next week. You'll see I put some questions for reflection as usual on the outline. But why don't we have a few moments of quiet and reflection to pause and then I shall pray.

so that the church may be built up. Heavenly Father, we thank you in your great kindness for the many gifts that you have given to each one of us, all of us as a church family.

And we pray that you would help us to exercise our gifts in love for the building up of your people. And we pray especially as we think about our Sunday morning meetings, our Sunday morning services like this.

We pray that they would indeed be places where people are built up, where what we do is intelligible, engages the minds, and where outsiders continue to be welcomed and find it useful.

[33:30] And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.