

How to be gifted but useless

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[0 : 00] Our reading today is starting in 1 Corinthians 12 on page 1155, so 1155.

We're going to start at the end of chapter 12 at verse 27 and read through chapter 13. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, 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. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

[1 : 16] And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give away all I have, if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way.

It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away. As for tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

But when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child. I thought like a child. I reasoned like a child.

[2 : 34] When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now, I know in part. Then, I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

So now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three. But the greatest of these is love. Helen, thanks very much indeed for reading.

Please do keep 1 Corinthians 13 open. And why don't we pray as we start. Let's pray together. 1 Corinthians 15, verse 58.

Heavenly Father, we pray this morning, knowing that naturally we are hard-hearted.

We pray, please, that you would help us to take your word to heart, such that we might be those who are always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord, our labor is not in vain, because Jesus is indeed risen.

[3 : 54] And we ask it in his name. Amen. Well, perhaps like me, you've had the experience of a DIY project that went wrong. And, well, Ben obviously hasn't, since he only has two screwdrivers.

But the more you try to fix it, actually, the more wrong it went. And it became clear, after much angst and frustration, that actually the only solution was to start again and go back to ground zero, so to speak.

Or perhaps you've had the experience of an electronic device that went wrong. And you downloaded all the updates, and that didn't work. You called the techies, which in our family means getting a teenager in, and that didn't work either.

And you know the only option at that point is to press the reset button, and go back to ground zero, and start all over again from scratch.

And that is really what the Apostle Paul is doing here in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. He is saying, let's press the reset button. Let's start again from scratch, and think again together what is essential to church, and go back to the foundations, and build a new structure from scratch, from the ground going upwards.

[5 : 13] Because the church in Corinth was following what we might call the way of gifts. We saw that last week, where impressive, upfront spiritual gifts, and the gift of tongues in particular, were regarded as the hallmark of spiritual maturity.

The way of gifts asked questions such as, what gifts have I got? How can I get to use them?

Especially the exciting ones, in a way that can make me feel, look good.

So that people will think, I am a spiritual, impressive Christian. And of course, in a way which it follows, others feel about themselves, are second class Christians.

Well, the first part of the reset came, last week in chapter 12, verse 3, where the Apostle Paul said, therefore I want you to understand, that no one speaking in the Spirit of God, ever says, Jesus is accursed, and no one can say, Jesus is Lord, except in the Holy Spirit.

Every real Christian, everyone who says, Jesus is Lord, is spiritual. Because every real Christian, has the Holy Spirit. Do listen to last week's talk, if you missed it.

[6 : 26] The second part of the reset, came in chapter 12, verse 7, which then really summarizes, the rest of the chapter. Let me read it. Chapter 12, verse 7, to each is given, the manifestation of the Spirit, for the common goods.

Spiritual gifts are given, to every real Christian, they are given for, the common goods. Which means of course, that just like the human body, every part is needed.

Everyone is needed, in the local church. Chapter 12, verse 27, where our reading started this morning. Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.

It follows of course, that no one gift, is the mark of being truly spiritual. Not even, the gift of tongues, that the church in Corinth, prized so much.

Verse 28, and God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

[7 : 32] Are all apostles? Clearly, the anticipated answer is no. Are all prophets? No. Are all teachers? No. Do all work miracles?

No. Do all possess gifts of healing? No. Do all speak with tongues? No. Do all interpret? No. But then surprisingly perhaps, Paul adds, verse 31, that earnestly desire, the higher gifts.

And in chapter 14, he will show what he means, by that. But before he does so, the Corinthians need to hear the third part of this reset. And that is the second part of verse 31.

And I will show you a still more excellent way. There is a more excellent way than the way of gifts that the church in Corinth has been pursuing.

And that is the way of love. And that is what Paul is going to unpack in 1 Corinthians 13. And therefore, God's aim for us this morning as we look at this chapter is that we, in a sense, reset the way in which we do church.

[8 : 43] For all of us, I think it will be challenging. It's been challenging for me as I've been looking at this passage over the last few weeks. But I think as well, we're going to see how wonderfully attractive the picture, the portrait is of church that the Apostle Paul paints for us.

Perhaps especially, and I know there are some of us, perhaps especially those of us who in the past we've had bad experiences of church and we're sort of wary of getting involved in church. We find this picture of the church as a body that Paul portrays threatening. And I hope actually we'll find it is a very attractive picture of church.

So you'll see there's an outline on the back of the service sheet. First of all, love is essential. Verses 1 to 3. Now, it's been hard to find anyone who has a kind word to say about the England football team having been knocked out by Iceland on Monday evening.

I think everyone's been scratching around their family trees to see if they have any Welsh blood in them at all. I have none, I'm disappointed to say. You can have all the gifts, all the skills, all the talent, all the training.

[9 : 50] You can be paid a fortune, but if you cannot score goals, you are nothing. And that is precisely what the Apostle Paul says here.

Chapter 13, verse 1. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gang or a clanging, a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Perhaps this is how the Corinthians described the gift of tongues, as the language of angels. It sounds wonderfully spiritual. But without love, says Paul, your worship is like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

The kind of instruments that would have been used in pagan worship. You're just pagan. You're just behaving like the world. Or verse 2, if I have prophetic powers, well you say, that sounds pretty good, being able to understand the mind of God.

And if I have faith that can move mountains, that prays and acts and sees God at work in the world, well you say, that sounds pretty good. And verse 3, if I'm generous beyond what most would ever contemplate, even if I die a martyr's death, is that not impressive?

[11:01] Well without love, says Paul, I gain nothing. I'm hollow and empty. Perhaps like a mirage in a desert which is full of promise, but actually there's nothing there.

Completely nothing. You see here are the Christians in Corinth, look at our gifts they say, look at our church, we're really something. And Paul says, but there's no love.

Which means that actually all gifts are nothing. But also, did you notice how he says in verses 1 to 3, not just that all gifts are nothing, but actually that you are nothing. Is that not a shocking thing to hear?

I think it's hard to get our heads around it really, so just keep a finger in chapter 13 and turn back to chapter 1. And let's just remind ourselves how the Apostle Paul started this letter.

Chapter 1, page 1146. Let me read chapter 1, verses 4 to 7.

[12:10] I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus. That in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and in all knowledge, even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It sounds wonderful, doesn't it? Enriched in all speech and in all knowledge, yes, even the gift of tongues, not lacking any spiritual gift, verse 7. But chapter 13, they are nothing because those gifts are not being exercised in love.

Perhaps like an entry for the Eurovision song contest and all they get is a bunch of zeros. No point is what Paul is saying they get for their church meetings. Well, let's change it a bit.

for our situation. What Paul is saying is that I could preach brilliant sermons, I could lead outstanding Bible studies, I could know my Bible from cover to cover, I could give confident answers to tricky questions, and yet without love, I am nothing.

Now, don't get Paul wrong, he's not depreciating spiritual gifts, but notice that he refuses to recognize any positive assessment of them unless the gift is discharged with love.

[13:37] Now, of course, this is not, is it, how things work in the rest of life. So just think of school or think of work or university. In the rest of life, you can be brilliant and that's all that matters.

You know, you can be the most brilliant soloist, you can charge a complete fortune for people to come and watch you in concert and you'll get the most wonderful applause afterwards. And the fact that you are arrogant and pig-headed and rude and a complete nightmare to work with, well, it doesn't matter.

But that's not the case in the church. Without love, says Paul, you are nothing. In other words, love is not an optional extra in church life.

I think one of the really surprising things you see about this chapter is that I guess it's fair to say probably that some of us are used to the idea that formal or traditional Christianity can be pretty empty.

You know, stuffy churches, stuffy vicars, stuffy songs, stuffy services. But actually, Paul is saying that spectacular, humanly impressive Christianity can be equally empty.

[14:50] Is that not surprising that he says that? Spectacular phenomena in themselves. You see, are not a sign of God's presence and blessing. In other words, we mustn't make the mistake of simply assuming that a church which is lively is a good church.

Not, of course, that we should be dull. But the church in Corinth was terrifically lively. It was very impressive indeed. And yet, what did Paul say? Remember back in chapter 11, verse 17, what did he say?

When you come together, it is not for the better but for the worse. It would be better, he says, if you didn't meet. So easy, isn't it, in life generally and in church life, perhaps church life is no different, to exalt those with impressive gifts.

Who do we look to to serve in particular ways? Well, we quickly plump, don't we, for those who have obvious gifts. Whereas what is Paul saying in 1 Corinthians 13?

Where is the starting point? No, you go for people who love. Just as easy to value activity and those who are busy serving the Lord in a variety of ways.

[16:07] But without love, says Paul, our activity, our busyness is nothing. Imagine for a moment that all our sort of busyness and activity is rather like sort of leaves on a tree.

And so what do people see? You see, when they look at our lives, they see a tree with lots of leaves. Good things. Signs of health. But the point about the leaves are that leaves on a tree point to hidden fruit which you cannot see just as a glass but which should be there.

But sadly, you see, as Paul looks at this tree that is the church in Corinth, actually he sees very little fruit. He sees lots of excitement and activity but no love.

It's a reminder, isn't it? It's possible to be busy, active, serving in many ways, perhaps very good ways. But actually, what does God look for most of all?

He looks for love because love is essential. Secondly, love is revolutionary verses 4 to 7. Now, one of the most important questions we should ask when we're reading the Bible is what did this passage mean to the original listeners?

[17:28] I hope you're in the habit of asking that question. Do you ask that question? What did the passage mean to the original listeners? Now, if we don't ask that question in 1 Corinthians 13 when we read it, I think we're probably likely to get all sentimental.

Again, I think to myself, what a wonderful description of love. These would be great verses to have at a wedding. I guess some of us have had these verses read out at our wedding.

But actually, we'll have completely missed the point of what Paul is really saying. Because rather than a sort of pen portrait of love, rather than Paul writing to a couple who are about to get married, actually these verses are carefully targeted dance which are designed to prick the pride of this church in Corinth.

As they were read out in Corinth on a Sunday morning, I don't think there would have been audible gasps of, oh, isn't that lovely? No, I think there would have been audible gasps of shame.

Perhaps anger. Paul, how can you say this? Because these verses, you see, describe precisely what the church in Corinth was not like.

[18:46] I put some verses on the outline, do look them up later. But in brief, you see, love is, verse four, patient and kind. Yet some in Corinth feasted at church meals while others starved to have nothing.

Love does not envy or boast. It is not arrogance. Yet some in Corinth boasted in their gifts, boasted in their favorite leaders, boasted in their knowledge and understanding. Love says Paul is not rude. It does not insist on its own way. It's not irritable or resentful. And yet the Corinthians insisted on getting their own way, on their own rights. They're eating in idle temples despite the fact that others were scandalized by their behavior.

And far from burying the hatchet and making light of wrongs, they're taking each other to court. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

Unlike the Corinthians who weren't shocked, it seemed, by the fact that one church member was having sexual relations with his stepmother, 1 Corinthians 5. Finally, verse seven, love is resilient.

[19:55] It's not suspicious. It seeks to believe the best about others. It tries to build relationships rather than destroying relationships. These verses don't describe what the church in Corinth was like and they don't describe what we are by nature like either.

I tried doing this this week, trying to substitute my own name for the word love in these verses. And I tell you, I didn't get very far. Simon is patient and kind.

Simon does not envy and boast. It just gets embarrassing, doesn't it? Especially with members of my family sitting in this room. I can't, you know, I just can't go on this morning.

But people have observed how these verses do perfectly describe the Lord Jesus. You see, just see what happens when we fit his name in verses 4 to 7.

Jesus is patient and kind. Jesus does not envy or boast. He is not arrogant or rude. Jesus does not insist on his own way.

[21:10] He is not irritable or resentful. Jesus does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

because this is revolutionary love. It's not the kind of natural human love which we have for other people. You see, how does human love naturally work? Well, human love naturally works by I see something that is lovely or attractive or impressive, whatever it is, in the other person.

And because of what they are like, I am naturally drawn to them. That is how human love works, isn't it? But this is not like that. This is revolutionary love.

It describes God's love. God who loves the unlovely. John chapter 3 verse 16, Jesus says, for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

In John's gospel, you may know the world is not a place of beauty. It's not a place which God is kind of attracted to in the sense of there is a whole lot of beautiful people who love me and so I'm going to love them.

[22 : 20] No, the world is not like that. The world is a place in rebellion against God. A world which rejects God. And yet Jesus died on the cross in the place of sinners.

In other words, God's love is self-originating. It's not because the world is lovely, it's because God is love. Which is a rebuke, of course, isn't it, to any of us who imagine we can impress God with what we do.

We can't. But I think it is also an encouragement for the more thoughtful amongst us. A great encouragement for the more, for the humble Christian believer who says to themselves, well, frankly, I know what I'm like.

Frankly, I know that I'm very good at loving myself and I'm not very good at loving others and I'm not very good at loving God. and he then prays that God would transform their hearts by his spirit, that Jesus would pour his love into their hearts such that they might be like this and demonstrate this kind of love in increasing measure.

An other person centered love, a love that is concerned for others, a love that is expressed at great personal cost, just like the Lord Jesus.

[23 : 43] a great thing, wouldn't it, to be praying for ourselves, to be praying for each other as a church family. You see, why does Paul say all of this in three chapters, chapters 12, 13, and 14, which are all about the Holy Spirit?

And did you notice that actually the Holy Spirit isn't mentioned at all in chapter 13? That's rather surprising, isn't it? But surely the point is because the greatest visible evidence of the work of the Spirit in the local church is the love we have for each other.

I put John chapter 13, verse 35 there on the outline where the Lord Jesus said, by this all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.

And of course, the more our world turns its back on Christ, the more the church is going to stand out. Over the last week, we've seen recriminations over the Brexit vote, political parties tearing themselves apart, an increase in hate crimes, friends and colleagues bitterly divided.

In a world like ours, actually, a church like this is going to be a very special place indeed. A church which demonstrates this kind of love.

[25 : 03] So love is essential, love is revolutionary, and thirdly, love lasts. Have a look at verses 8 to 10. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away.

As for tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

Now the contrast, as you can see in these verses, is between this age now and the age that is to come. Notice the spiritual gifts which the Corinthians so valued are all associated with this age.

But they will pass away. They will cease. Verse 10, when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. Now, there are those who think that this time of perfection is talking about the time when the New Testament was completed, and I'll say more about that in two weeks' time.

But my own view is that verse 12 makes it pretty clear the perfection Paul is talking about is the return of the Lord Jesus, when we will see him face to face. And therefore, you see, his point is, don't obsess with what is temporary and miss out and ignore what is eternal and lasting.

[26 : 19] It's a very simple point. Paul isn't saying spiritual gifts are unimportant. Of course not. But he is saying the spiritual gifts that the Corinthians so valued are not nearly as important as they thought they were because they won't last.

The gifts in verses 8 and 9 are prophecy, tongues, and knowledge, all gifts which are in some sense to do with knowing God and knowing God's will. We'll see more about that in two weeks' time. They will cease because, verse 12, in the new creation we will see God face to face and we will know God perfectly.

Verse 12, for now we see in a mirror dimly but then face to face. Now I know in part then I shall know fully even as I have been fully known.

So imagine you plan a trip to the States and you're going to go and see a friend or a relative who lives in America who you haven't seen for ages. It involves lots of Skype calls as you fix all the details when you're going to go and what you're going to do together where you're going to meet all that kind of stuff.

Skype's a great thing. And then you fly out and you meet up at the airport and you go back to their house or flat or apartments and you unpack and then it's the time for the catch up.

[27 : 35] And just imagine your friend says well look, you go into that room over there and I'll go into that room over there and yep, you've got your laptop, I've got my laptop and we'll have a Skype catch up.

There's something slightly odd with that wouldn't it? We've flown all the way across the Atlantic to see each other and it just wouldn't work would it? It's something very wrong indeed. Thank you. Well in the new creation you and I if we are trusting in the Lord Jesus we'll see him face to face. And that is what I think explains verse 13. So now faith, hope and love abide. These three but the greatest of these is love. There's no place for faith in the new creation because we all live by sight. There's no place for hope in the new creation because we'll experience the fulfillment of the promises. They remain now but they won't then.

Only love will last. Just as when the sun rises you have to be up very early at the moment to see the sun rising but if you can think what it's like in the winter when you see the sun rising then all other lights are extinguished aren't they?

[28 : 52] You switch off your car headlights you switch off your lights inside all other lights go out. The gifts the Corinthians so valued you see will not be needed.

It is love not the display of impressive gifts that makes the church like heaven. Here is a quote from Don Carson the greatest evidence that heaven has invaded our sphere that the spirit has been poured out upon us that we are citizens of a kingdom not yet consummated is Christian love. Someone said to me the other day how thrilled they've been to join a growth group and how wonderfully caring and loving the growth group was way beyond I think their expectations. Let's be praying that that kind of love would increasingly be the hallmark of our life together as a local church. A longing that the spirit might shed God's life God's love more deeply into our hearts and do so with greater power.

And then over the next couple of weeks in 1 Corinthians 14 we're going to see what it looks like in practice to prioritize love to walk down the way of love together rather than to walk down the way of gifts which the Corinthians were doing.

[30 : 23] Let's have a few moments of reflection and then I shall lead us in prayer. Love is patient and kind love does not envy or boast it is not arrogant or rude.

Heavenly Father we praise you very much for the love of the Lord Jesus that's self sacrificial other person centered and supremely for the way in which we see that not only in his life but in his death dying on the cross in the place of those who are unlovely and undeserving winning forgiveness and life with you both in this world and the next.

Heavenly Father we're so conscious how self-centered we are naturally how self-centered our love for others is so often and we pray therefore that you would fill us with your spirit such that in increasing measure we might demonstrate in our life together this other person centered Jesus like love and we ask it in his name Amen.