

1 Corinthians 14:1-25 AM

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: 05 May 2024

Preacher: Rev. Ben Roberts

[0 : 00] Let's pray together as we stand. Lord, you have taught us that all our doings without love are nothing worth. Send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love, the true bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whoever lives is counted dead before you.

Grant this for your only Son, Jesus Christ's sake. Amen. Please be seated. As I begin, I have an announcement to make. I've decided to cancel the marathon for next year.

It's too inconvenient, so we'll get my people to work on that. And if you're nervous about all the tongues in our reading, as I start, my whole sermon is in English today.

I'm American, so I'll do my best, but striving for English. It's good to joke, because so many of us, when we come to this passage, we've had real difficulty with it, haven't we?

We've seen a lot of misuse and misunderstanding. And I know it personally. So as a baby Christian, my first steps of faith were in what was called a Reformed Charismatic Church, which is an interesting combination.

[1 : 20] At 17, I did a gap year internship in a church, and it was essentially a Pentecostal church. And I saw God do absolutely wonderful things there. But in the years following, I saw how the founders of both of those churches that I was a part of were exposed for things that were illegal, ungodly, and extremely damaging.

Afterwards, I went to Wheaton College, and that's the other end of the spectrum. So people joke that Wheaton worships the Father, Son, and Holy Bible. And I spent four years at Wheaton trying to figure out how to reconcile those experiences that I had had, those extremes.

And here's what I think the irony is about it. The Lord's answer is right here in 1 Corinthians. So the texts that are so often misused are the very texts where we learn to grow peacefully together in the gospel.

So instead of avoiding and kind of wishing that this wasn't in the Bible, we actually have to dig into this as best we can. And we have to keep cracking away at it, asking questions, studying, praying, listening to the Lord, listening to each other.

And that's how we'll grow together. And as we do that, we ask that the Holy Spirit would help us in this text to see the Lord's priorities. And I think his priorities here run much deeper than tongues and prophecy.

[2 : 43] Because this chapter shows us very practically, very practically, how do we love when we gather together? We practice love. We build each other up with clarity, with order.

And any gifts that the Spirit might give, we welcome, and then we use to serve the same purpose of building up of order, of clarity. So this chapter really reframes what is truly spectacular in the church.

Sometimes we're looking for the spectacular, but it's actually, it's not what's flashy. It's this clear, disciplined commitment that many of us have to build up the person next to us.

It's very simple. It's not flashy at all. But that is what's spectacular to God. Okay, so we're going to look at this in three points. First, building up.

Second, speaking up. Third, speaking out. So let's talk about building up. If you're open to chapter 14, you can look at verse 1. That will help you.

[3 : 43] It says, Do both.

Pursue and desire. Chapter 13 defined love. Now we have to pursue that love. Pursue is the same Greek word as persecute.

We chase love. We hunt love. Not to do harm, but we're always keeping it in our sight, right in front of us. We're running after it. We're chasing after love for others' good.

I just love that Paul, before he met Christ, this is what he did. He persecuted Jesus' followers for harm. Now he says, persecute or pursue love as you build Jesus' followers in the church. Such a beautiful reversal in his life. Without love, our grand words or sacrifices or gifts are nothing. And so to achieve or to build anything together, love has to govern our life.

[4 : 51] Love has to govern what we do together. And so this means that our money and our time and our words and our deeds and our spiritual gifts, we enlist them in this chase after love, in this chase after clarity and order together.

So we desire the spiritual gifts, and we desire them in order to love better and better. The presenting issue here in Corinth is tongues and disordered worship.

But the main point is how do we pursue love together in the gathering? How do we use our gifts to serve love together? I think this is really interesting because commonly, perhaps culturally, we think of love sometimes.

It's just kind of letting go or giving in to desire. But Christian love is very different. Agape love is different. And Paul, to describe love here, he uses the image of building over and over and over in this passage.

So if you look at verse 3, Paul says the reason he's recommending prophecy above tongues is because it brings up building, encouragement, and consolation. If you look at verse 5, all this is so that the church may be built up.

[6 : 03] Verse 12, strive to excel in building up the church. Verse 26, let all be done for building up. So we're to pursue love by building.

Raise your hand if you've ever built anything. Okay, so you know. Building demands dedication. It demands discipline. It's about planning and order. It's hard work.

And this is something I had to learn. When I was young, I built a fort. And it was in the bushes. It was in the back corner of our property.

And I went around. We had a barn and stuff. And I kind of dragged out any sort of scrap wood I had, scrap pieces of metal. I had no plan whatsoever. And I just kind of nailed it all together, duct taped it together.

And it was just a miserable shack. It didn't even have a door. It actually had a hole in the roof. So you had to climb on and kind of drop through, which seemed cool, but was not great.

[7 : 04] The floor was dirt. It was soggy all the time. It smelled like mildew. I can still smell it when I think about it. I could barely fit in it. Rodents absolutely loved it.

The irony is that about 20 feet away, my dad built for me a tree house. And I'm not joking. He actually made a blueprint, like a real blueprint for the tree house.

And he would spend summer evenings. He would sit in a lawn chair, and he would just stare at the tree with a sketchbook. And he would sketch out what he thought the tree house should look like.

And he bought lumber and paint and everything.

And he spent literally more than a year building this tree house. And it was a work of art. And it was a work of love for his children. And I think that's how we're called to build in the church.

You could have called my fort feelings, right? It was impulsive. It was childish. It was self-centered. I nailed it together with any little thing I could find. It ended up being terrible. But the tree house was like the cathedral that Paul described in chapter 3.

[8 : 11] He says there that a wise, like a wise master builder, he built on the foundation of Christ. And he built a building that will survive a fire and come out stronger.

And then later, he says, we all work together to strengthen that building, which in chapter 12 kind of morphs into a body. And it's actually a building that's interdependent. And it's alive. We're all pieces of it.

That the strong care for the weak, each of us has a part to play. And it requires love in order to do it. And so we practice humility and clarity and order.

And we all share the same building plans, the same blueprint, which is the gospel and the Bible.

And we have the same architect, which is the Lord Jesus Christ. And now, all together, we work for clear and open communication.

We listen. We consider others' needs. We do what we think would be most helpful. And this is an act of self-discipline. We discipline ourselves to serve the Lord and his project, not to serve ourselves.

[9 : 16] Sometimes this even means we keep our opinions to ourselves. Can you believe that? Later on, he says, in the instructions he gives, it's like, if you want to be the most helpful, you can be quiet, which is a good word for me.

If we're all building our own little forts instead of God's church, we're fostering disorder and division and dysfunction. And when we come together, that's what we're going to have. And that's the case in Corinth. When we gather, it always shows what our priorities are. In Corinth, the priority is self-promotion. And so it causes disorder and damage. And we've already seen this as deadly around the Lord's Supper. But here we see that actually there's disorder everywhere. The whole service is disordered. And particularly, it's the use of tongues and how tongues are taking a priority over prophecy. And so in Corinth, tongues have just brought this building project to a complete halt. The tongues in Corinth, it seems, are not human languages. Perhaps they're angelic.

[10 : 22] They're not. But the point is, they're not understood by anybody in the gathering. These tongues, Paul says, speak to men or not to men, but to God. So God's the only one that knows what they are.

And the result of this is that some people are only building themselves up. So they're building forts. Everyone else is completely lost. And the resulting gatherings are chaotic and competitive. People striving for attention.

Because of their practice of tongues, they are lacking a common understanding. And so Paul uses all these really interesting examples in verses 6 to 12.

He says the way they're using tongues, it's like trying to sing a song without a melody. It's like trying to wake up troops or command troops with just random horn blasts at random times.

It's like trying to communicate without speaking the same language. We've all been there. It's frustrating, right? It's just noise that accomplishes nothing. And I think there's something fundamental here that we learn, which is that our gathered worship, it's not just a couple of hundred bodies in the same room.

[11 : 27] It's communal. We're doing this together. It's collaborative, right? So it's not just 200 of us worshipping in parallel at the same time. We want to worship together.

We want to be able to say amen. When we're praying or singing, we all want to be a part of it. And we want everyone else to be a part of it. We all want to understand what God is saying and doing in the congregation.

And so I can labor and prayer at home in whatever language I want. I could use feelings deeper than words, as Paul talks about in Romans 8. But that's not why we came here this morning.

We're not here for that. We don't come as individuals to consume spiritual goods on Sunday mornings and then just go home when we're full, right? We're here to build.

We're here to work together. We're here to share in whatever it is that God is doing here in all of us, to love and learn and encourage and to serve. So this is the heart of it.

[12 : 27] Love demands that we build others up. And building requires that we do everything in a clear and understandable way. And that's the main point that Paul is making here.

We could finish there and it'd be an easier sermon for me. But we're going to talk about tongues and prophecy now. So that's point two, speaking up. We're going to talk about these two speaking gifts that Paul talks about.

So I want to start by reminding us that we serve a living Lord. So Jesus' spirit dwells in you and among us. He's alive, he's active, and the Lord is always working in ways that surprise and delight and challenge us.

And part of that is that he gives gifts in his time, in his way, as he chooses, to whom he chooses. Not all Christians can expect all gifts at all times.

There's no spiritual gift that we all must have. God gives the gifts as he wills for our common good, for our common building. Paul says that we should want whatever gifts God might give.

[13 : 38] So that we can take and submit them to love. And build others up in Christ with them. God orders the gifts. And then we order ourselves to use them for love.

So our job here then is discernment and care. It's discernment around how we can honor the Lord best and each other with the gifts that he gives. So let's talk about how we can do that with tongues. Paul says there are various kinds of tongues. Both foreign human languages and angelic unknown languages. We see this. We see both kinds in the New Testament.

The tongues can be controlled. So this means believers can choose to not speak in tongues, even if they have this gift. Paul says this is the best idea in the church gathering. Except when there's interpretation.

And really the meaning here in the Greek seems to be that it's except when the tongue speaker can actually interpret themselves. What the tongue is. Tongues are not the evidence.

[14:44] The evidence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. You may have heard this before. But in verse 5 Paul says that he would be happy if all the Corinthians spoke in tongues. And what that implies is that not all of them do.

It's not up to them. It's up to the Lord. We learned last, or I guess two weeks ago, that the mark of the Spirit being in a believer's life is confessing that Jesus is Lord.

In a true way where their life is changed and they rest in him. And it's the Spirit that opens our eyes to see Jesus. So that we can trust him. And so this confession is the first and greatest gift that all believers have.

And it's the sign that the Spirit is in us. Verses 13 to 19 describe tongues as a kind of heart worship or a singing or a prayer. It's a spiritual expression to God that is not understood mentally.

They're not unreal. But they're also not an end in themselves. He speaks about how tongues will cease. Paul says he speaks in tongues more than all of them.

[15:52] But not in church. In church, he says, it won't build others up, so I won't do it. And you can just imagine the scene in Corinth, given everything that we've seen about this church through the weeks before.

How you've got this bunch of puffed up and proud people. And they're just dominating, dominating and kind of putting themselves up in front of everybody. In this unintelligible singing and unintelligible speech.

And the people that don't have this gift are just confused. Paul says even in private that tongues should be paired with a desire to understand with our minds.

Which is interesting. And I think this is the principle that love demands articulation. So, my family might know that I love them. I think they know. But they'll know it better if I use words.

And actually, I'll know it better if I use words. If that makes sense, right? When I take the time to use words, I come to understand my love better as well. And that's what's happening here.

[16:56] Just as we might express love that way, we frame our feelings for Christ with the knowledge of Christ. So that our hearts and minds can be fruitful together.

We're more than just minds. We want to love God with what we feel and what we desire and what we do. But we are transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Meaning that God builds us up through understanding. Several Christians over the years have said something like this to me. I was sitting and reading my Bible and praying.

And all of a sudden, I was speaking in tongues. And I believe it's possible that this is the gift that Paul speaks of here. I don't know. And I know that there's been sustained disagreement for Christians around this.

But I think that's why Paul's advice here is especially helpful. That we pursue love. That we seek order. And we work to build understanding. We always pursue prayer and praise and thanksgiving with our minds.

[17:59] No matter how else we pray. And this will build a prayer life that is fruitful for us and for others. Because we'll practice articulating things to the Lord in prayer.

We submit ourselves to God's word and teaching in scripture. And then using what we know, we're always praying and thanking God in a way that we understand. And sometimes in ways that we don't understand.

And we're also told to pray that God would give us gifts that more directly benefit the gathered body. Because generally, the best way to love and build others up is not to be using tongues when we come together in a service.

In this, we pursue love together. Now for prophecy. So prophecy is God speaking through a person to his people.

Dr. Packer, I think, is really helpful on this. He writes that prophecy is more forth-telling than foretelling. So it's not really primarily about future events.

[19:02] Sometimes, but not usually. God, rather, in prophecy, is speaking forth his purpose to his people in the present. He's calling them to hear and obey by his word.

And one of the things that's so difficult about prophecy is that it's so diverse in scripture. It's seen in a lot of different forms across the whole Bible. So there's sermons and dreams and revelations and symbolic actions.

And prophecy is actually how the Bible came to be. It's God's word written. First through the Old Testament prophets. And then through the New Testament apostles.

That select group that were taught directly by Jesus. And Paul tells the Corinthians to seek prophecy over tongues. Because he wants the assembly to listen to God's word altogether. The tongues are a gift from God. But they're being used to speak over or cover over God's word. They're filling the room with so much noise that God's voice can't be heard when they gather together.

[20 : 07] And this is why he says in verse 20, don't think like children. I can connect to this one. Children are noisy. At least my children are. I can't even hear myself think at home.

They're noisy because they're excited and they're also pretty self-absorbed. And maturity is taming your voice to listen and to build together.

What I love about this passage is all the benefits of prioritizing God's word in the church. We're built up and encouraged and consoled.

Verse 3. We're instructed. Verse 19. We're convicted and converted. Verse 24. As we are led to worship, our hearts are laid bare.

God's presence becomes apparent in our gathering. Paul commands them to weigh prophecy in verse 29 and in other letters as well.

[21 : 06] And he clearly says that prophets need to submit to apostles in verse 37. And so this means that the prophets in Corinth are not speaking for God. Not the way the Old Testament prophets did or the way the apostles do.

The speech of the prophets here stands under an established authority. And that authority is what we now call scripture. And Paul says in a really exciting turn of events that this gift can manifest in any Christian person.

He uses the word all. All over the place. And we've seen elsewhere in 1 Corinthians that there's prophecies described in women and men. It's given to those who preach and those who don't.

And whatever this might have looked like in Corinth, I honestly don't know what this would have been like. Wouldn't you love to have been there to see them practicing prophecy together? I think David will tell you next week what it looks like.

But whatever it looked like, the principle of authority is really clear. That prophecy stands under the prophets. It stands under scripture. And so do we.

[22 : 15] God has spoken and is still speaking through the Bible. Which was generated and recorded by the Spirit's prophetic gifting. And the word is still spiritually energized.

And so it's still encouraging and comforting and convicting and teaching God's will. Whenever we open God's word. When we preach it or teach it or study it or share it. When the word bubbles up in a time of trial.

When I share it or someone shares it with me to comfort. We can expect that in some way God is going to be speaking prophetically. I think that God surely speaks in many diverse and wonderful ways through his people to each other.

But we know also that he's spoken perfectly and authoritatively and clearly in scripture. And that's how we test everything that is said. It's where we rest week in and week out.

We rest in his word, the Bible. And so I think that the heart of Paul's exhortation is this. Build each other up as we share and listen to what the Lord says.

[23 : 19] And we strive to do that sincerely, humbly, and eagerly as a community. And as we do that, we should pursue love. Okay, this is my final point.

Don't worry, it's short because I got bogged down in the first two points. The third point is speaking out. And this is about verses 20 to 25. The way we end up behaving together.

So however we end up taking Paul's advice to pursue love and to order ourselves and to build up. It will directly affect our witness. So the way that we speak here and the way we build here and live here together, it's going to affect what people hear out there.

Or when they come to visit. And I think this is, that's a bit scary. But it's also really exciting. Because we're building metaphorically. We're building each other metaphorically in encouragement and learning and service and all these ways.

We're also literally building. God is adding new people to his body. And these verses are giving a warning that we could behave in such a way that our spiritual gifts, the way we use them, could actually end up driving people away from the faith.

[24 : 36] So this quotation of Isaiah, he's saying that in the Old Testament, God actually judges his people by using speech that is not understood. And so the takeaway here is that when our practices in the church are unintelligible to outsiders, it actually works as a judgment against them.

So it's not a sign that brings them in. It's a sign that drives them out. Paul is very blunt here. To carry on in chaotic and unintelligible ways makes our neighbors think we're crazy. And they already think we're crazy. Right? Even when we act in a clear way. And this could mean that they potentially miss Christ in the gospel. Because we're not willing to discipline ourselves. We're not willing to build up. And so how we construct our services and how we gather and how we worship, it shouldn't be childish. That is, we're not looking to our own needs.

We're not looking to our own desires and feelings and doing whatever suits. We're seeking always to build others up together. Including people who haven't yet believed. So beyond the systematic and the structural kind of thing that we love as Anglicans, this means something for us personally.

[25 : 49] This means that each of us should seek to welcome and include and encourage people that are new. It means we should think about their experience when they visit here. Do they have a place to sit?

Have they spoken to anyone? And as we order ourselves for clarity so everyone can understand, what will happen is that the prophetic power of God's word is going to cut through.

It's going to cut into the heart. It's going to convict us and other people of sin, visitors of sin. It's going to help us to see the presence and power of God is here. So, let's build a place where people want to listen, where people want to stay.

We can do this by pursuing love together. As we desire more and more of the spiritual things that God would give. In order that we might use our gifts selflessly to build others up into a beautiful cathedral.

Clear and ordered as we come together. Submitting our lives to Christ and his word. Amen.