

Sermon 63: The More Excellent Way: 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:3

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:3 "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret? But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing..."

Summary: God has called us to serve the church as He has fitted us in genuine Christian love.

Introduction:

- **Our next section further develops how to exercise our spiritual gifts in the church:**
- **He summarizes the discussion in the following way:**
 - **Look out for others: 12:25** "The members should have the same care one for another..."
 - **Take an interest in their burdens: 12:26** "Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it..."
 - **Rejoice in their blessings: 12:26** "or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it..."
 - **See one another as family: 12:27** "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular..."
- **This section is the capstone to the discussion:**
 - **Remember who you are:** Ye are...
 - **Remember who is in charge:** God hath set...
 - **Desire what is best for the body:** Earnestly desire the best gifts...
 - **Follow the best possible practices:** I show you a more excellent way..."

Truth 1: We are the body of Christ: 12:27 "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular..."

- **Example 1: The sacred union of individuals into one body, His Church:**
 - **"Ye:"** A plural reference to individual Christians.

- **"Body:"** A singular reference to the Church as the Body of Christ.
- **Conclusion:** We as individuals have been united into one Body the church.
- **Example 2: The sacred union of individuals into one body, His Temple 1 Corinthians 3:16** Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?"
 - **"Ye are:"** Another plural reference to individual Christians
 - **"Temple:"** A singular reference to the church being His Temple
 - **"Spirit:"** A singular reference to the Holy Spirit.
 - **"Dwelleth in you:"** A plural reference to each believer.
- **Conclusion:** We as individuals have been joined together as His Temple, because the Holy Spirit indwells each of us.
 - **1 Peter 2:5** "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ..."
 - **Ephesians 2:19-22** "Ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit..."
- **Example 3: The sacred union of individuals into one body, His Temple 1 Corinthians 6:19** "What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?"
 - **"Know ye not:"** A plural reference to all believers.
 - **"Your body:"** A singular reference to the Church which is His body.
 - **"Temple:"** A singular reference to the Church which is also His Temple.
 - **"Is in you:"** Another singular reference to the Church which reminds them of the sacred union they enjoy as a body united to Christ and housing the presence of the Holy Spirit.
 - **"Ye have:"** Another plural reference that reminds the believer that this presence of the Spirit is not just a corporate reality, but also an individual reality.
 - **"Ye are not your own:"** Another plural reference that reminds Christians, that the way they use their physical bodies and the way they relate to the Body of Christ matters.
- **Implication:** Since we have been united to Christ and are a member of His Body, we have responsibilities to the Body of Christ and to God in the way we use our physical bodies.

Truth 2: He is in charge: 12:28-30 "God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? ³⁰ Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?"

- **He governs distribution:** "God hath set some in the church..."
 - **"Set" can have the sense of making an appointment**
 - **1 Corinthians 12:18** "God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him..."
 - **Acts 1:7** "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power..."
 - **This governance demonstrates the church belongs to Him:**
Matthew 16:18 "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it..."
- **He determines prioritization:** "First...secondarily...thirdly...after that..."
 - **Interpretation:** There is some uncertainty as to what Paul is saying here.
 - **Option 1:** Order in sequence.
 - **Option 2:** Order of importance or priority.
 - **Suggestion:** There is a sense where both order in sequence and priority could be in view:
 - **Sequence: Ephesians 2:20** "Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone..."
 - **Sequence: Ephesians 4:11** "He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers..."
 - **Priority: 1 Corinthians 12:31** "Covet earnestly the best gifts..."
 - **Priority of love over prophecy and tongues: 1 Corinthians 13:8-10** "Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away..."
 - **Priority of prophecy over tongues: 1 Corinthians 14:1** "Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy..."
- **He determines boundaries:** "Are all...do all..."
 - **Gifts of office:**
 - Apostles

- Prophets
- Teachers
- Miracles: Potentially a reference to the work of the evangelist.
 - **1 Corinthians 1:18** For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God..."
 - **1 Corinthians 1:24** "Unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God..."
 - **1 Corinthians 2:4** "My speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power..."
- **Gifts of ministry:**
 - Healings
 - Helps
 - Governments
 - Diversities of tongues
- **Implication:** God has the right to work in and through the church as He pleases.

Truth 3: We should desire to exercise the most edifying gifts: 12:31

"Covet earnestly the best gifts..."

- **Be zealous:** "Covet earnestly..."
 - **Earnestly desire**
 - **Be motivated not complacent**
 - **To pursue out of an intense desire: 1 Timothy 3:1** "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work..."
- **Prioritize carefully:** "Best gifts..."
 - **"Best" in this context has the idea of most useful.**
 - **Priority of love over prophecy and tongues: 1 Corinthians 13:8-10** "Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away..."
 - **Priority of prophecy over tongues: 1 Corinthians 14:1** "Follow after charity, and desire spiritual gifts, but rather that ye may prophesy..."
 - **Prioritize the spiritual edification of the church.**
 - Sometimes authoritative instruction is the priority
 - Sometimes faith and confirmation of the message is the priority.
 - Sometimes mercy is the priority.

- Sometimes acts of service are the priority.
- Sometimes administration is the priority.
- Sometimes discernment is the priority.

Truth 4: We should follow the best possible practices: 12:31 "Yet shew I unto you a more excellent way..."

- **Not a gift, but rather a way:** "A more excellent way..."
 - The consistent pattern we present to the church.
 - The consistent practice of the church.
- **Paul's personal example: 13:1-3** "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing..."
 - **Fact 1: His apostolic office and faithful service did not guarantee a favorable verdict at the Judgment Seat:** "Though I...I am nothing...it profiteth me nothing..."
 - **1 Corinthians 9:25-27** "Every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway..."
 - **2 Corinthians 5:10** "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad..."
 - **1 Timothy 6:12-14** "Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses...That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ..."
 - **2 John 1:8** "Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward..."
 - **Revelation 3:11** "Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown..."
 - **Fact 2: This principle applies to all kinds of gifts:**
 - Tongues
 - Prophecy

- Wisdom
- Faith
- Giving
- Martyrdom
- **Fact 3: God can work through people despite their flaws:**
13:3 "Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing..."
 - **We need a balanced perspective:**
 - He uses sound teaching for His glory.
 - He provides for needy people through the gifts of others.
 - He provides insight and wisdom through flawed instruments.
 - Even martyrs are flawed people.
 - **He can use us to profit others despite our flaws:**
 - **Isaiah 55:11** "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it..."
 - **Philippians 1:15-18** "Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife; and some also of good will: The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds: But the other of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel. What then? notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice..."
 - **2 Corinthians 4:7** "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us..."
- **Fact 4: We should not take comfort in our "ministry success" or consistent external conformity:**
 - **We will experience struggle:**
 - **Galatians 5:17** "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would..."
 - **Romans 7:19-23** "The good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight

in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members..."

- **We will experience tensions:**
 - Our duties
 - The influence of the Spirit through the Word.
 - Our fleshly passions
 - Worldly influences
 - Complicated circumstances
- **We will grow in these virtues:**
- **We will need to make a choice:**
 - Faith is not the absence of all doubts, but the choice to trust despite the doubts.
 - Faithfulness is not the absence of distraction, but the choice to self-correct in the moment to fulfill our commitments.
 - Courage is not an absence of fear, but the choice to take responsible action despite the fears.
 - Love is not the absence of self-centered impulses, but the choice to put to death our selfish desires and choose to act in the best interest of the one we love.
 - Forgiveness is not the absence of pain, but the choice to take those pains to God and let Him be the ultimate judge.
 - Joy is not the absence of sorrow, but the weight we choose to give to those sorrows in proportion to the gratitude we give for our blessings.

Putting Everything Together:

- It is not just what we do, but also why we do it.
- Even when we are struggling, God can work through us.
- Even when God has worked through us, we should not allow ourselves to justify wrong motives or actions.
- The consistent expectation should be to serve out of Christian love.
- We should be constantly growing in this virtue.