

Sermon 51: 1 Corinthians 14:1-25: Putting the Gift of Tongues in its Place

OUTLINE

How to pursue the gifts
Why we pursue certain gifts

INTRODUCTION

40 years ago Neil Postman wrote a now famous book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. It was a book looking at the impact of television upon society. He points out that our brains have been turned to mush and that we are being trained by this new technology and now prefer entertainment to education; sentiment to argument; spectacle to substance. Through the overstimulation of modern programs we lose our taste for dialogue and debate. He talks about how crowds used to sit riveted for hours listening to presidential candidates debating the other, recalling how Abraham Lincoln and one of his opponents had a public debate that lasted 7 hours while the crowd sat and listened. He mourns how modern audiences make up their minds about which presidential candidate they support, not by listening to the content of their policies but based on sentiment. He spoke about the crisis that the modern world was facing as we became an unthinking people trained into shallow ways of thinking and value judgements based on technology. The very word 'amusement' is literally made up of two words 'muse' which means to think and 'a' which is a negative prefix meaning 'non'. Now we are in a much more precarious position aren't we? Here we are 40 years later and we have had the internet explosion, the invention of social media, portable devices, and now AI. We have built our lives on technology that literally enslaves us through dopamine stimulation, and through a steady stream of platforms that train us into instant gratification, instant value judgements, instant information, if the user is shaped by their tools what are we becoming?

Entertainment before education; spectacle rather than substance, this is a weakness not only of our modern age but of the human heart in general, and a real problem in Corinth. Paul had laid a foundation emphasizing that as Christians we are people who are to be governed by love. He has defined it very carefully and very specially to the Corinthian situation. Love is a servant not a master; it puts others forward not itself; it is humble not proud; gentle not forceful; more concerned about what others gain not itself. Paul now moves to another problem situation that needs addressing the way in which the Corinthians have been implementing the gift of tongues. It appears that they have allowed the spectacle of tongues to dominate the worship service; and those who have the gift have a sense of superiority and have been forcing themselves on the congregation. Corinth seems to have a surplus of gifts, Paul indicates that they are gifted not only in knowledge, but also in tongues. This is the only church that Paul has to come in a regulate on this front. Now that Paul has laid a foundation of teaching about the gifts in chapter 12, and how to use them in love in chapter 13, he goes about giving further teaching on the matter of tongues and its usefulness to the church.

We will be taking a larger section today, v1-25. Here we see Paul putting the gift of tongues into perspective in light of the foundation he has laid. He puts the principles of gifts being for the purpose of edifying the church and to be used in love into a practical discussion as he shows how tongues must be rightly used.

He does this by way of contrast by comparing tongues to prophecy. We will look at these verses under two headings, firstly, we will hear Paul tell us how to pursue the gifts; here we will look at v1-6 looking at how love pursues gifts and the use of them that edify the church not only ourselves. Secondly, we will follow Paul's long explanation at why we are to pursue these gifts in this fashion.

How to pursue the gifts

V1, 'Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.' The word 'pursue' is the same word for 'persecute' or to describe a hunter hunting its prey. It is a very strong word indicating that first and foremost we must pursue love. Then Paul talks about earnestly desiring the gifts. The Corinthians were neglecting this order, they were pursuing gifts first and foremost and not in a loving fashion. Paul gives a concrete application of what this would look like for the Corinthians. He tells them that those who are dictated by love and pursuing gifts, will desire to prophecy first and foremost. Paul for the rest of our section will contrast tongues with prophecy to demonstrate why this is the best way to pursue gifts. The nub of Paul's argument is quite simple, prophecy is better because it is understood and can therefore build others up, but tongues on their own can only at best benefit the one who has the gift. Though based on the fact that Paul indicates that those who pray in tongues do not understand what they say unless they have the gift of tongues, it is clear by implication that even that benefit is limited.

V2-4, '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. ³ On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. ⁴ The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church.' Here we see Paul making his basic point. Firstly, tongues if not interpreted is not speech that is directed towards men for their edification but is only understood by God. Why because no one in the church understands him even though he may be saying the most profound things by the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, those who prophesy, well they do multiple things, prophecy as the Word of God edifies, a building metaphor from which we get our word edifice; it encourages this is the same word as Parakletos used for the Spirit by Jesus indicating comfort; and consolation is lifting up the depressed and downcast. Now Paul's point is clear, prophecy is better than tongues because it is understood by others and builds them up. That said there are different opinions that rush in at this point to try and make other points by Paul's statements about the nature of tongues and prophecy and so it behooves us to give a definition of tongues and prophecy.

Tongues, is it the miraculous ability to speak another language, or is it ecstatic speech that resembles no human language that is nevertheless a vehicle of the Spirit? Although the word tongues could technically be used to describe what even some pagan cults had in ecstatic speech, the biblical use points to actual languages. Here are some supporting facts for this: firstly, Acts 2:8-11 indicates actual present human languages; secondly, this word is used to describe people of every tribe, 'tongue' and nation, referring to recognizable human languages; thirdly, in this chapter itself Paul assumes in v10-11 that human and identifiable languages are what he is discussing; fourthly, the example of tongues quoted in v21 from the OT, Is. 28:10-11 refers to the human language of Assyrian as a judgement upon Israel. What this means is that any phenomenon of tongues that is not an actual human language but is merely ecstatic speech can be

ignored as fake and not what Paul is talking about. So if you think you have the gift of tongues, record it and put it into google and see what language it is, if it is a real language, then praise God, if not, stop deceiving yourself.

Another matter to discuss is whether Paul views more than one type of tongue and a private prayer language for every believer is in view? We will pick up this thought later in the next few verses.

What is prophecy? Now there are those who believe that the gift of prophecy is to be in the church today, but they often make a distinction between the gift of prophecy that the apostles and first century prophets had which is unrepeatable, and a lower order prophecy. The argument goes that because Paul says to the Thessalonians that they should test prophecy that must mean that there was a prophecy of a lower order that could err or was mixed with error. They then come to v3 which describes prophecy as 'upbuilding and encouragement and consolation,' and conclude that this is what makes up the substance of lower order prophecy, and so today we should have an open mic and anyone who wants to edify, or encourage or console can have a go as long as it is in an orderly fashion. I do not think that Paul is using prophecy in any weaker sense here, and when he describes it as 'upbuilding and encouragement and consolation,' this is not an attempt to describe the content of lower order prophecy but rather a contrast to what prophecy accomplishes as opposed to tongues which because not understood does none of these things, but if understood would be all three too.

V5, '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.' I remember many teachers in the Charismatic church saying, 'You see, Paul does think that we can all pray in tongues and prophecy,' from this verse. Paul has already made very clear that not everyone has the gift of prophecy, nor does everyone have the gift of tongues, 1 Cor. 12:29-30. Paul is not contradicting himself and saying, that if we desire enough with enough faith we can all speak in tongues and prophesy. No, he is showing that he is not against the gift of tongues and would wish it for all, but if all were to have a gift, he would wish prophecy for all because it brings benefit to others. This want of Paul's should not be seen as Paul contradicting his earlier statements but as helping the Corinthians to love each other with their gifts.

Differences of opinion about the gifts aside, there is a challenge for all of us here. Paul has spelled out that gifts are given to each one of us, that the gifts are given for the purpose of edifying each other, that we should be so directed by love that there should be no selfishness in how we use gifts but a desire to serve one another more with the very gifts God has given us. Paul's point is not for us all to get hung up on tongues or prophecy but to be driven by love and serve each other. I am sure that we would all like to camp out here in the controversy and continue to wage the war between believers on these matters, but Paul's overall point must be heard. Are you serving others with your gifts? Are you like the Corinthians using your gifts for personal benefit and not for the benefit of others? Are we so self-absorbed that we are more interested in whether we are seen and appreciated than whether we are actually doing any good for another?

Why we pursue certain gifts

Why should we pursue gifts like prophecy and not tongues without interpretation? Paul spells out the point that unless someone understands what is being said, there will be no edification of each other. He uses several examples one upon another repeating himself to make his point. Firstly the example of his own preaching, even an apostle if not understood will do no one any good. V6, '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?' Secondly, he uses the example of musical instruments needing to make a distinct sound to communicate a song or lead singing, v7, 'If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played?' Thirdly, he uses the example of a bugle rousing an army for battle, v8, 'And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?'

After these illustrations Paul spells it out for the Corinthians drawing the necessary inference that tongues if not understood are of no benefit to the church, v9-12, '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. ¹⁰There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, ¹¹but 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. ¹²So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.' Tongues if not understood is no different from talking into the air, or being a foreigner to someone who is family. We must not have activities like this which are futile, in other words doing no good; and alienating, making those who should feel included and benefitted feel like they strangers. Paul is not saying that the Corinthians should not seek the miraculous gifts but that they do so to the benefit of the church.

Paul now shows them how to both pursue the gifts in a way that is loving and edifies others given their particular situation, v13-19, 'Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. ¹⁴For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. ¹⁶Otherwise, 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? ¹⁷For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. ¹⁸I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ¹⁹Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.' Paul tells those who have the gift of tongues to seek interpretation of tongues. So that whether you are praying or singing in tongues and say Amen others can say Amen with you. What is the gift of interpretation? I remember having a friend who claimed to have the gift, he would give a tongue and then also give an interpretation. My friend and I were intrigued because we knew that we should seek the gift and wondered what it felt like. So we asked him. He revealed that he got up to the mic, gave a tongue, and the interpretation was not a translation but he just shared a thought that he had during his quiet time that morning. This is not what Paul is talking about. Interpretation is the Spirit enabled ability to translate languages. Many claim to have this gift today, but when someone talks to them in biblical Greek or Hebrew they do not give a translation of what was said but something completely different. Some have tried by Paul's description of praying in the Spirit to say that every Christian can therefore expect to have a second baptism in the Holy Spirit with the evidence of

speaking in tongues having a private prayer language. I hope we can all see from the context that Paul is talking about the context of the congregation, as v4 indicates. Paul reveals that as an apostle he too has the gift of tongues but would rather speak 5 words that are understood by others than 10 000 words in an un-understood tongue.

Intelligibility is key. This is why we do not conduct our services in Latin; this is why we use bible translations that are readable; this is why we explain technical terms when we come across them in the Bible; this is why we talk about why we do certain things in our worship service so that all know and understand what we are doing. Paul having explained the principles now drives home the application.

V20, 'Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.' Paul has spoken to the Corinthians about childishness several times. They have been called childish because they are filled with childish ways by dividing into competing man following groups. He has spoken to them about putting childish ways, childish, speaking and childish thinking behind them and act like adults who are generally less self-absorbed. Once again but here indirectly he tells them not to be childish in their thinking, but infants in evil. By implication being attracted to entertainment not education; being attracted to spectacle and not substance; being more interested in that which gets a lot of attention as opposed to that which brings benefit; being more persuaded by confidence that content, all of this and more describes the errors of the Corinthians who were using the gift of tongues in an unloving manner. We learn from this that there are things that might be attractive and gather a crowd but are not beneficial to the body of Christ, we must do those things that God has appointed in the church, not follow our grand ideas about what works.

In a last comparison in this section showing the superiority of prophecy over tongues he shows how prophecy is superior to tongues in both the lives of believers and unbelievers. V21-25, '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." ²² Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. 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? ²⁴ But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, ²⁵ 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.' Paul begins by paraphrasing from Is. 28. Here he calls the prophets 'law' because law was the most basic summary of the OT. the people of God refused to listen to Isaiah and repent, therefore God was going to punish Israel, because they did not want to listen to the clear word of God when it was given to them, they would be judged with what they want, they are judged by strangers whose speech they do not understand invading them. Paul is highlighting the point that those who insist on tongues and not intelligible speech in the church are ironically like those under the judgement of God.

Paul then shows that tongues are a sign for unbelievers, for example as it was applied to unbelieving and stubborn Israel, and even on the day of Pentecost not believers; but prophecy is a sign for believers. Despite this general fact, prophecy because it is understood is still more effective than tongues in the life of an unbeliever even though tongues is the sign for the unbeliever. Paul gives some hypothetical situations. Imagine everyone in the church was speaking in

tongues, the unbeliever would think that you are insane. Paul it seems is criticizing the practice of mass tongues in the worship service as counterproductive to the gospel. Even on the day of Pentecost souls were saved by Peter's sermon not the tongues themselves. In fact the disciples were accused of being drunk. It seems that the Corinthians were more interested in freedom, enthusiasm, volume and expressing oneself in the liberty of the Spirit than what the unbeliever would think. How many of you have gone into a charismatic worship service and the mass singing or praying in tongues without interpretation is encouraged? This is contrary to what Paul is saying here. Now imagine another scene, but this time everyone is prophesying and revealing the secrets of the unbelievers heart, and speaking about sin and talking about forgiveness in Christ. Instead of merely a cacophony of sound it becomes a waterfall of truth and revelation. Even though prophecy is technically a sign for believers; even unbelievers are benefitted by clear communication rather than mere demonstration of power.

Let us not miss what Paul says, when we come together for worship as the Church God is really among us. And when the truth about sin and the gospel is clearly understood even the unbeliever can be convinced of this truth. So let me put to you, are you here as an unbeliever? What should move you to believe? Do you need to see people falling over under the influence of the power of the Spirit, or hear people suddenly speaking in a language they have not learnt? No, Paul reveals that you can know God is real because when you hear the truth about your own sinfulness exposed. When the Spirit convinces you of your sinfulness, your unworthiness, the judgement that you deserve. When you hear of God's willingness to save people like us who have sinned against Him. When you hear that He has sent His own Son to pay for the sins you have committed. When you see how gracious He is to unworthy sinners and how willing He is to forgive and adopt you. When this truth is understood and driven into your heart by the convicting power of the Spirit; this is how a person is saved. as you fall on your knees confessing God's reality, confessing your sin and asking for mercy, you too can be accepted by God, forgiven by God. Seeing a miracle, seeing a work of power may grab your attention, but the truth of your sin exposed and the love of God in Christ revealed, and you responding in faith to these things, this is what will save you. Do you believe?