

The Greatest Of These Is Love



Mark Gyde – December 2017

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In 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 Paul encourages us to desire and seek after spiritual gifts.

We often view these as the qualities which have been given to us to enable us to live as the family (or body) of Christ on the earth.

When we think of a gift it is usually something which someone else acquires and then gives to us. The ownership is transferred and what was theirs is now ours and we are free to use it as we see fit. It is ours to use, to put in a cupboard or even to give to someone else should we want to. When a gift is given the giver really has no further say in what happens. Sometimes a gift is given with conditions attached or it is to be used for a specific purpose and that may be alright if those conditions are fully understood and agreed with. Seeking to control a gift once given can be manipulative and, for the recipient, takes away the joy of receiving.

A gift should be freely given in order that it may be freely enjoyed.

I think when we read 1 Corinthians 12 we interpret it in a similar way. We perceive that God is giving us something which we can take and then put to good use in order to make us a better person. And so we view the gifts of the Spirit as being like a tool box. We look into this treasure trove and decide what we would like, we pick it out of the box and then use it to enhance our ministry. Unconsciously we have found something which makes us look good, or at least look better than we did before.



This creates a problem as invariably the various gifts begin to define what we do and then they become labels: “I am a prophet”, “I have a healing gift”, “I have discernment” and so on. We take on a false identity based on a role (or performance) rather than living in our true identity as sons and daughters. Not only do the labels define us but they limit us. Instead of living like Jesus and only doing what we see the Father do we end up doing what our particular label permits us to.

The Holy Spirit is not a tool box for us to dip into. The Holy Spirit is the Father’s own Spirit who is given to remove the empty orphan-ness of the human heart and to bring us into relationship with the Father; the same relationship that Jesus enjoys and lives in.

In fact, the gifts of the Spirit do not follow our normal understanding of a gift. Yes, they are a gift but there is a deeper understanding for us to fathom. As I’ve said, our understanding of a gift is that the ownership of something is transferred: it was yours and now it is mine. But the gifts of the Spirit come as a result of the Spirit himself living in us. They are an outward manifestation of someone living in our heart.

These gifts are not us taking and using something akin to a tool. It is the Father, living in us by his Spirit, who is being revealed through our actions and deeds. As Paul writes, the gifts of the Spirit are a manifestation of his life within us (1 Cor 12:7).

This tells me that the gifts of the Spirit are not something we do. They are not skills we learn or develop to make ourselves look good, they do not define who we are.

Sadly, we have often equated the gifts of the Spirit with something we do. We have tried to build the family, or the body, of Christ through our own actions or our own perception of the gifts we feel we have been given. The result is an organisation built by and controlled by man.

The body of Christ is a spiritual temple, built not by human effort but by the impartation of holy life that becomes the very root and source of everything we are. It results from us being connected to the source of life and then allowing that life to transform our heart (John 15). The internal transformation is manifested externally.

Because we have believed that the gifts of the Spirit are things we do, we bring that same logic to the important topic of 1 Corinthians 13. Paul ends chapter 12 with the words “and now I will show you the most excellent way”. Something even better than gifts (or abilities)



is about to be revealed. We are about to be shown the best way to live.

So much of our thinking has been about what we have to do that we easily miss the point. Love, the subject of chapter 13, is not something we do.

When we live from the tree of knowledge of good and evil we are consumed with what we have to do in order to enter God's presence, to win his favour or to feel that we have made things right. This wrong thinking will lead us to believe that we have to love. Not only is this wrong thinking it's a complete misunderstanding of the nature of the love and hence the Father.

How can we love if we, ourselves, have not first received love (1 John 4:10 and 19)?

Love is not something we primarily do, it is something we receive.

God is Father and God is love.

Our reading of 1 Corinthians 13 should really start like this:

“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have the Father's love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and I have faith that can move mountains, but do not have the Father's love, I am nothing.”



The most excellent way, or as the Passion Translation puts it, *"a superior way to live that is beyond comparison"*, is one of living in love.

It is highly commendable to be a loving and compassionate person but that is not the most excellent way. It is good to be generous with your time or possessions but that is not the most excellent way. It is good to be diligent and want to do your best, whether in your family, your workplace or your church but that is not the most excellent way. It can be good to serve freely but that is not the most excellent way.

There are so many things that are good but they are not the superior way of living which Paul is revealing for us.

The most excellent way is for us to live in the Father's love.

Our prime motivation for receiving love should not be so we can then give it away. We need to receive love purely for the sake of receiving love. We receive it primarily because we need it for ourselves. We receive it as it is the only way for the "life of Christ to be released deep inside of us in order that the resting place of his love becomes the very source and root of our lives" (Ephesians 3:17 The Passion Translation).

The natural consequence of living in love is that it will begin to flow from us to others. We don't have to force that as it happens automatically. As we filled with all the fullness of God we won't be able to contain it and slowly, little by little, the world will see who our Father is.

We don't 'do' love, we receive it and live in it.

How then do we discover this pathway of love?

I believe it starts with the realisation or revelation that we need him. The Beatitudes, in Matthew 5, start with the words "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God". The Message and New Living Translation maybe put this into more accessible language: "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God" (The Message) or "God blesses those who are poor and realise their need for him" (NLT). When we recognise the need we have for the Father we have taken the first step in becoming like Jesus. We are beginning to recognise that we, like Jesus, can do nothing of our own volition.

It is easy to rely on our own strength and abilities, after all they are God-given, but ultimately they are limited. They are limited to what we can 'do'. This is a powerful revelation – we are limited and the sooner we realise this the better it is for us.

Having faced this realisation we then have a choice. Do we continue to live in our own strength, walking down the pathway of striving and performance or do we yield to call of love which is beckoning us towards our homecoming. God, our Father, is gentle and winsome and he never forces his will upon us. He leaves us free to respond and choose. Yes, he does everything to woo us but we have to respond. The power of submitting our freewill to him is the doorway to our freedom.

When the lost son returned home (Luke 15) his father did not welcome him with a formal handshake or greeting. No, he threw his arms around him, kissed him and made sure he knew he belonged. As a son he had never lost his place in the family, he belonged to it forever (John 8:35).

Each one of us needs to experience our own personal homecoming. We recognise our need of him, we choose to come home and then we receive the Father's affirmation "you are my beloved son or daughter, you belong". As we hear those words spoken, with love, into our



heart we come home. The striving and turmoil of our heart can subside as begin to realise that 'doing' is not enough, it will never be enough, after all how can we possibly do enough to satisfy the God who created the universe. Doing is never enough, but resting in his presence is.

We strive for rest, we pursue peace but all too often they allude us and we end up trying to survive. We've climbed the wrong tree and are trying to make our home there. It's never going to be comfortable nor is it going to be home.

It is only in coming home to the arms of the Father that we find the peace and rest that we've missed. It's in that place where we can also begin to receive the comfort our heart needs. It's in that place where our heart is healed. The healing of our heart is not the end

of the journey but rather the beginning. Our Father wants our heart to be healed, he wants us to be whole but there is something greater he desires and that is us. The healing of our heart is the doorway into the glorious freedom of the sons of God. It is the catalyst for something new and great not simply the end of a process. Every time you see your heart being a bit more healed, see it as an opportunity to enter a greater level of freedom as a son or daughter.

Helene King describes this as being awakened to the awe and wonder of who God really is. He is our Father and he loves us as he loves his son, Jesus. He is love. As we come to know him, we come to know and experience not only his love but him loving us. The words we

read in 1 John 4:16 “know and rely on the love he has for us” are experiential words. They are based on fact and knowledge but much, much more than that they are based on our experience of love, the person of love being a Father to us. There is a big difference between knowing God is a father and knowing that he is being a Father to you. One is a fact, the other is an experience and one we get to enjoy every day.

This is living in love.

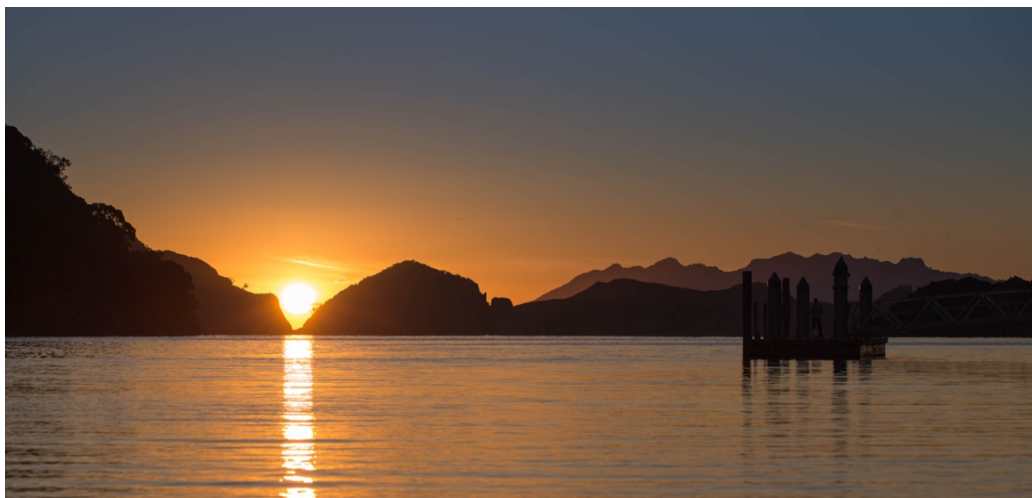
As we live in love every area of our lives will be transformed. We will start to produce the abundant and lasting fruit we are promised in John 15. This is something we have tried hard to produce in the past, largely through our own effort and we have ended up being discouraged as we have not seen it happen. Fruit comes from abiding or resting in the Father’s love. It is not our fruit but it is the fruit of the Father’s spirit living in our heart. It is the external manifestation of the internal transformation. It is the Holy Spirit being revealed in our lives.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul reminds us that all our ‘doing’ will come to an end. When our ‘doing’ ends there will be three things which will remain: faith, hope and love. The greatest of which is love.

Yes, let us desire the gifts of the Spirit, but not as a tool we pick up or put down. Let us see these gifts not of our own making but the work of the ‘other Helper or Comforter’ sent by Jesus to release us into our eternal sonship. As we live in love we become like Jesus who only did what he saw his Father doing. One day he prophesied, one day he healed, one day he taught. Everything he did, he did as a son who was following the pathway of love.

Love is not something we ‘do’, it’s something we receive.

Continually opening our heart to receive love is the way of sonship, it is the most excellent and greatest way.



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