

TO SERVE IN HUMANITY WITH DIVINITY

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MESSAGE NINE: THE APOSTLE PAUL'S UPLIFTED HUMANITY WITH DIVINITY IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

EXERCISING THE GIFTS IN A LOCAL CHURCH LIFE

The matter of gifts can be the biggest frustration in any local church life. People who are not gifted can be a problem, and people who are gifted can be a problem. When saints don't exercise their gift, it is a problem. But even when saints do exercise their gift, it is also a problem. A local church may have very good saints with a healthy desire and a faithful love to the Lord, yet very few of them may know how to exercise their gift properly. Many times those who are not so gifted exercise a lot, and those who are very gifted do not exercise enough. This is why the matter of gifts can be the biggest frustration in any local church life.

These next few statements are crucial, and we must remember them our entire life: Spiritual things can be subjective. Spiritual experiences are subjective. Spiritual exercises demand maturity. Why can the matter of gifts become such a frustrating problem? Because spiritual things are very subjective. This is not only true of believers in the Lord Jesus, but even with those who follow other religions. People who strongly believe in a religion are subjective. Buddhists are subjective. Muslims are subjective, even to point that they would willingly give up their life.

We need to realize that Christians are also subjective in so many different ways. Those who like to speak in tongues are subjective in their tongue speaking. Those who like to teach the truth are subjective in their teaching. We need to remember that spiritual things can be subjective.

If we have this realization then our whole attitude concerning spiritual things will become very different. For example, oftentimes we in the recovery may use the phrase, “You are not in the flow. You are not one with the ministry.” These statements are very subjective. “You are not in the flow.” Then what is “the flow”? “You are not one with the ministry.” Then what is “the ministry”? We may not even know what such statements mean, but it is very easy for us to use them to condemn others. We need to remember that spiritual things can be subjective. We are all subjective. Everyone who touches the Lord only a little becomes a “professional.” They think, “I know what is right. I know how to follow the Lord. I know the truth.” When Christians declare things such as this, we need to remember that spiritual things can be subjective. We say spiritual things “can be subjective” rather than “are subjective” because there is still a way to evaluate them.

Spiritual experiences, on the other hand, are one hundred percent subjective. We often say, “I really have the Lord’s leading,” or, “I am so much in the Lord’s presence.” These statements aren’t wrong, and we shouldn’t despise them. At least these are considerations about the Lord. But we should also remember that even when we are so much in the Lord’s presence it can be very subjective. For example, who experiences “the Lord’s presence” the most? Those who are in love and are ready to get married. When saints are in love, they are so aware of the Lord’s presence. When they pray, they have a clear sky. But it seems like after they are married, the Lord is farther away. Actually, there is no difference before and after they are married. Christ is the same, and they are the same. It is only their psychology that is different.

When they are first in love, the Lord seems so near. After they are married for a time, His presence does not seem as strong. This is because spiritual experiences are subjective.

Furthermore, spiritual exercises demand maturity. We shouldn't say, "I am gifted! I can speak! I have something!" No, whatever spiritual exercise we have demands maturity. We need to pursue and become mature. Then our maturity will bring out our spiritual exercise. Otherwise we will become a divisive element in the church life. We need maturity to know how to operate properly. Again, spiritual things can be subjective. Spiritual experiences are subjective. Spiritual exercises demand maturity.

The church in Corinth, no doubt, was rich in the manifestation of the gifts, yet with little life, little building up. The more gifted they were, the more problems they caused and the messier their situation became. They treasured the gifts because these gifts were from the Lord, yet they had little realization of the preciousness and crucial nature of the operations of these gifts. We need to treasure the gifts, because they are from the Lord. However, we need to be careful. Not many of us have the realization of the preciousness and crucial nature of the operations of these gifts. If a brother is told by a leading one, "You are gifted," quickly he will go back to tell other saints, "I am gifted. This leading one has told me so." When a brother gets a good comment from a leading one he will never forget it. But if he is rebuked by a leading one he will try to forget it the next day. People treasure the manifestation of the gifts, but do not realize the preciousness and crucial nature of these gifts' operation.

The gifts given by the Lord became a source of a chaotic church life. Sometimes we wish that a local church did not have so many gifted ones. For example, if a local church has a large number of full-timers, this can make the church life chaotic. That is why denominations are content to have only one pastor.

It makes sense, because the rest of the congregation doesn't have to read the Bible or pursue the Lord. If they want to do these things, then they can go to a seminary and become a pastor somewhere else. This causes the congregation to be orderly, because there are not many gifts among them. But in one local church you may have many gifted saints. Surely this causes the church to become chaotic. Why is this so? Because the gifts can very easily be improperly used. Paul helped this situation progressively by reminding them, "There are distinctions of gifts, but the same Spirit." It is the Spirit that gives us the gift. If we have the Spirit, we become gifted. However, the gifts can be very different among us. We may have a gift that is somewhat unique, or is crucial in a certain way, but all the gifts are from the same Spirit. We should not make ourselves higher than others. We all are gifted because we have the same Spirit.

"And there are distinctions of ministries, yet the same Lord." The gift we have must grow into a ministry. First we have a gift from the Spirit. Then we have a ministry, which is from the Lord's lordship. The gift is free. The moment we first call on the Lord, we are gifted. It is that simple. Anytime we are in the Spirit, that gift becomes alive and begins to operate. But for our gift to become a ministry, we need the lordship of the Lord over us. We need His lordship in our consecration, through our obedience to Him, and through our giving of ourselves to Him. It is by this our ministry will come out. Without His lordship we will be a gifted person, but not a person with ministry. For this reason we need to pray, "Lord, I need Your lordship."

"And there are distinctions of operations yet the same God, who operates all things in all." Our gift needs to grow into a ministry, and our ministry produces an operation. This operation is actually our stewardship. But this operation, this stewardship, must be according to God and His economy. We operate according to what God desires, and not according to what our gift would tell us. For example, we might say, "I'm burdened to preach the gospel, because that is my gift." However, there is a time for the gospel in operation.

There is a season for the gospel, but there is also a season for growing in life, a season for building up, a season for truth, and a season for all kinds of spiritual operations. We must realize that all of these different operations must be according to God's economy, God's purpose. Our operation should not be based solely on our gift. God's economy must become the controlling element of our exercise of our gift. Our operation comes from God, who operates all things in all.

"But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for what is profitable." There is a long growth process from being gifted to having an operation. Then even if the operation of the gift is manifested, it is for profit and not for the manifestation itself. The reason we are gifted is so that others would be profited, and not that we would become "somebody." Similarly we shouldn't say, "In our local church, this leading brother speaks so well." If that brother speaks so well it is for the building up of the Body, not for the manifestation of his gift.

Furthermore, there is a long growth process involved. We must grow from being gifted to having an operation. How many years does it take? It depends on the degree. It may take two years, or it may take fifty years, but it is a long process. Therefore it is very shallow for us to say, "We are gifted! We are trained!" This is foolish. The process of growth is not so quick and easy.

For the same reason we should not uplift any leading one who trains us or renders us help. We should remember what Paul said earlier: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth." Without God we cannot grow. The real trainer is Christ, and the training we must go through is a long process. Paul did not say, "There are distinctions of gifts, but one teacher. There are distinctions of ministries, but one elder. There are distinctions of operations, but one leading brother." No, it is the Triune God who works to produce what is healthy for the church life. It is only God who can do this.

The Spirit gives us the gift, the Lord through His lordship produces a ministry, and the very God in His economy produces the operation. For the Triune God to produce an operation with us takes time. We must underline this fact again and again: There is a long growth process from being gifted to having an operation.

This is why young people often cause problems in the church life. They do not have the patience to go through such a long process. However, as we said before, the problems from young ones are usually good problems because that is how they grow. Young people should even be encouraged to cause problems. But they should only cause problems according to their zealously, not according to their gift. Zealously is harmless, but gifts can be harmful. For a young person to be somewhat wild in his zealously for the Lord does not cause much damage. But when a young person says, “Follow me! I am gifted! The Lord has spoken to me!”, then that is serious. That is why we must remember that spiritual experiences are very subjective. We should not trust in them so much. We should not be so confident in our subjective feelings. The young people should cause problems in their zealously, not in their gift.

Further, he stresses that we all are members of this one Body. We live corporately with the corporate Christ. In other words, we live in the Body of Christ, which is just Christ Himself. We live in an organic union with Christ and are organically related to one another. We are members of this one Body, and we are related to the Body organically. In this one Body, not only is there neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, but we should even realize the weaker ones are necessary. We often like to talk about the “promising ones” in the church life. We use the term “promising ones” to describe the ones who we consider to be the future of the Lord’s recovery. But in the Bible there is no such term. The Bible does not speak of “promising ones”; however, the Bible does speak of “weaker ones.” Paul tells us that the weaker ones are necessary.

As those who serve the Lord we must learn to attach ourselves to at least a few weaker ones. We don't even realize what a blessing we will receive by such an exercise. It is a blessing to learn that the weaker ones are necessary.

More abundant honor must be given to the less honorable. This is very different from our logic. We would give abundant honor to those who should be honored. However, they don't need it. They are already "honored." The "more abundant honor" should be given to the "less honorable." If we see a very young child, we give that child abundant honor. The parents don't need our honor, because they are already honorable. It is the little child, the weaker one, who needs more abundant honor. The love we express for the child is very different from the love we express for the parents. In the church life, we shouldn't just give honor to the elders and leading ones. Of course they surely deserve our honor, but in a sense they don't really need it. They are already honorable. More abundant honor must be given to those who are less honorable. The weaker they are, the younger they are, the more fragile they are, and the more limited they are, the more we need to love them. Honor should be given to those who are less honorable.

There are no divisions in the Body life and all the members should have the same care for one another. It is very easy for us to care for those who are honorable, but it is not as easy to care for the ones who are weaker and less honorable. How profound that Paul described the local church life in such a way. Yet, he advanced by saying, "Whether one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or one member is glorified, all the members rejoice with it." We would write this verse differently. We would say, "Whether one member suffers, all the members rejoice with it." Isn't that our practice?

Suppose one brother is frustrated and gives up the church life. What is our feeling? When this one member suffers, how do we react? We might say, “I remember when I was younger, he was such a good brother. But today he doesn’t even make the meetings, and here I am, still a good brother in the church life.” This means, “One member suffers, all the members rejoice with it.” We act as if a stumbling block was moved away so that we could advance and be “somebody.” This is not a light matter. How many of us realize that when one member suffers, all the members of the Body suffer with it?

Furthermore, Paul wrote, “When one member is glorified, all the members rejoice with it.” We might change this to read, “When one member is glorified, all the other members can’t handle it.” Or even worse, “When one member is glorified, all the members attach themselves to it.” For us to truly exercise according to what Paul has written requires the complete forsaking of our self-life. Then if one member suffers, we also will suffer. If one member is glorified, then we will rejoice.

We are individual members, yet we are blended as the Body of Christ. What we have just shared is the real description of blending. We often misunderstand the word “blending.” It is more profound than we think. For us to blend in the church life means that we live for one another, and we live according to one another. We let the Body, and the members of the Body, regulate our life. Even our happiness and our sorrowfulness are fully affected by the Body. Blending means that our life is under the regulation of the members of the Body of Christ.

Yes, God has placed the apostles, the prophets, etc., in the church, and they are not all the same. But, while we earnestly desire the greater gifts, we need to seek a more excellent way, that we become a person of love.

Here in Chapter 13 Paul was actually testifying about himself. Chapter 13 of this book is a mystery. It is a very well-known and popular portion, but very few understand what it means. Paul's description of love was Paul's testimony of his own exercise. He was someone who was in this "most excellent way." He was such a person, a constitution of love. Love is the highest divine attribute, and it also becomes the highest exercise in an uplifted humanity. In other words, our humanity is determined by our love. When our love is healthy, then our humanity is very healthy. Love overshadows prophecy, love overshadows knowledge, love overshadows mountain-removing faith, and it even overshadows all the good deeds involving both our possessions and the forsaking of our selves. No matter how well we can preach, love can do better. No matter how many trainings we have been to, if all the knowledge we have received is without love then the trainings didn't help us. All of these items - prophecy, knowledge, faith, and good deeds - are great things, but love overshadows them all.

Then, what is love? We can say, Christ was love, and Paul was constituted with Christ. Love is a person, Christ. Paul was constituted with this person, so Paul became love. His dealing with the dear ones in Corinth was an exhibition of love. Paul handled the situations in Corinth by exhibiting love. How he describes love is the same as how he treated them. He suffered long, he was kind, he was not jealous, he did not brag, he was not puffed up. He did not behave unbecomingly. As the begetting father and as the apostle to the church in Corinth, Paul easily could have been so provoked as to behave unbecomingly to the Corinthians. But he did not do this. He did not seek his own things. Paul did not want to get anything from them. He was not provoked and he did not take account of evil. He did not rejoice because of unrighteousness, but rejoiced with the truth. Sometimes we rejoice because of unrighteousness. For example, suppose we hear that a church is going through a severe difficulty. Then we say, "Our church is doing better than that church."

If we hear that a church is going through a hard time, we shouldn't be happy about it. We shouldn't think, "At least we are okay." If one church is not okay, then we are not okay either. We are in one Body. We should not rejoice because of unrighteousness, but rejoice with the truth.

His exercise was to cover all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. Again, Paul's description of love was actually how he treated the Corinthians. Paul believed all things, even in terrible situations. He had hope even for the brother who married his stepmother. Now we see that this chapter is a portrayal of Paul. He is telling them who he is in his exercise of love to them. The whole epistle shows such an exercise. Only a person who is so constituted with the divine attributes could live out such an uplifted humanity in love. Only such a person could give himself to the church, raise up the church, serve the church, walk alongside the church, and become a real blessing to the church. Chapter 13 is the highlight of the whole epistle of First Corinthians. Only a person of love could give himself to the church in such a way as Paul. When we declare, "I give myself to the church," it is almost a joke. Then the next day one brother offends us, and we can't take it. Only a person of love can raise up the church. Raising up a church is not easy. Many things will happen. Satan will attack. Some of the saints will be in their flesh and in their self-life. So if we want to raise up a church we must be a person saturated with love. Paul was also one who walked alongside the church. Paul could say, "When you suffer growing pains, I walk alongside you. I suffer the growing pains also."

It seemed that he was declaring to Corinth, I love you, the church that denied me, defamed me, criticized me, judged me, because love never falls away. Some in Corinth said, "Who is Paul?" They even accused him, and questioned his motive. But Paul still loved them, because love never falls away. When we have the picture of Paul and the Corinthians in view, chapter 13 becomes much more clear. He further encouraged them, in a sense saying, "Come on, grow up with me."

Now we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when that which is complete comes, that which is in part will be rendered useless. Come on, grow up to become a man, so that you can do away with childish things.” Now we understand why chapter 13 was put here. It was a display of Paul’s exercise to this local church. He admonished them, “Do you know how much you are known by the Lord? You are fully known by Him, but one day you will fully know Him as well.” How much the Lord knows us today is how much we will one day know the Lord. We will know Him just as much as He know us. This is Paul’s way of encouraging the Corinthians, “Dear brothers, grow up.” What blessing and what encouragement the apostle rendered to such a group of fleshly saints. This gives us a new understanding of love as described in this chapter. It is not at all doctrinal. It is completely experiential.

Finally, to encourage them not to despise the things God had given to them, he said, “Pursue love, and desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy.” We should be very careful about despising what people have. Even for someone to always come to the meetings and fall asleep is the Lord’s mercy. For someone to always cry when they pray is still the Lord’s mercy. Paul would tell us not to despise these things, because there is still something spiritual involved. We should appreciate whatever God has given to the saints. If a sister always sleeps during the meetings we should say, “At least she still comes. She could stay home, but she comes to be with the saints even when she is tired.” Our view must be positive.

Why so? He explained, “He who prophesies speaks building up and encouragement and consolation to men... he who prophesies builds up the church... since you are zealous of spirits, seek that you may excel for the building up of the church....whenever you come together, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.”

Paul said, “You must realize that your exercise should be focused on the building up of the church. That must be your burden and your goal. There are different gifts and different exercises, but they are all for building up.”

Paul testified that he spoke in tongues more than all of them. “You in Corinth think that you speak in tongues, but I do even more.” Yet in the church he would rather speak five words with his mind than ten thousand words in a tongue. We sometimes tell people, “Don’t use your mind,” but Paul here testified that he did use his mind. A tongue is not understandable because it does not require the mind. He fully realized the damage that tongue speaking in the meetings can do, yet he would not forbid the speaking in tongues. We should not consider tongue speaking to be a blessing. It is very hard for anyone to be involved in Pentecostal experiences and still love the Lord properly. Once a brother speaks in tongues, he becomes addicted to it. It becomes an enjoyable and intoxicating release, to the point where he feels every bondage is gone. In certain situations this can be a healthy experience because it makes a person free. But when a person becomes addicted he may no longer pray but just speak in tongues all the time without using his mind. This can lead to a wild and unexercised mind. Eventually if we focus on speaking in tongues we can become useless. Tongue speaking can become a lust that we pursue in our self-life. Then we are abusing the Lord’s gift.

We should remember that some things are harmful to the church, even if they are from God. Any gift from the Lord that is not exercised properly can become harmful. Among the gifts, the simplest is tongue speaking. If a person wants to speak in tongues he does not need to be educated, or love the Lord very much, or be consecrated. Anyone one has the desire is able to learn how to speak in tongues. When tongue speaking is emphasized in a church it can very quickly cause division by cheating the saints from the truth, bringing them out of the inner life, and distracting them from the proper focus on Christ. Many positive things can be wiped out by tongue speaking. This is serious.

Paul fully realized the damage tongue speaking can do. However, he would not forbid the speaking in tongues because it was still a gift from God.

Instead, he honored God's giving of the gift and respected even the most childish saints. Here again we see Paul's humanity. When we have one little spiritual experience it causes us to despise everything that God has given to other people. Suppose we meet a brother who loves the Lord, and we say to him, "It is so good to be in God's economy." The brother says to us, "What do you mean by God's economy? Does God make money?" Quickly we despise this brother. He is not clear. He doesn't even know what God's economy is. Yet Paul was not like this. Even though some were childish and caught by tongue speaking, Paul didn't despise them. He honored God's giving of the gift, and respected even the most childish saints.

What was the secret of Paul's serving life in practicality? His secret was that he honored whatever God has given. "I see a brother, and I honor him because he has a gift. I see a sister, and I honor her because she has something from the Lord. These saints may be young, but they still have the Lord's life. They are gifted." When we are able to honor God's giving of the gift and respect even the most childish saints, then we have entered into the secret for raising up people. We are able to work with God, because we are no longer subjective in our care for people. We no longer care for them based on what we know and understand. We don't go to people and say, "I see this. Do you see it? I have this truth. Do you have it?" Such an attitude is actually divisive. Paul's attitude was, "I know tongue speaking will damage the church so much, but I will not forbid people to speak in tongues. The best is that they would at least have interpretation, so that people can understand. If they speak in tongues, I still respect them." Paul honored God's giving of the gift and respected even the most childish saints.

He concluded, “My brothers, desire earnestly the prophesying and do not forbid the speaking in tongues. But all things must be done becomingly and in order.” After we read this portion we would have to say, “Thank You, Lord, for giving us such a servant.” May we all learn to serve the church in such an uplifted humanity.

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