

Sermon for February 10, 2019 - 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday Epiphany

1 Corinthians 14:12b–20

**Theme: Be Eager to Edify Others**

- 1) Not every spiritual gift accomplishes this purpose.
- 2) Ask God to help you excel in the ones that do.

*Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church. <sup>13</sup> For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says. <sup>14</sup> For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. <sup>15</sup> So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. <sup>16</sup> If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? <sup>17</sup> You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified. <sup>18</sup> I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. <sup>19</sup> But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue. <sup>20</sup> Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.*

I don't know if you've ever experienced it, but kids often like to brag about things that aren't really that important. Take video games, for example. You might have a child who is especially skilled at them. Every chance he can get, he talks about his virtual exploits. As parents, we might nod and try to be happy for him, but let's be honest: video game skills aren't really that important to us. Why not? Because they don't really benefit anyone except the person who has them.

God has given Christians a vast variety of gifts and skills. Some are meant to edify the Church as a whole. Others are only meant to encourage the person who possesses them. The problem is that we don't always understand the difference. Like children, we sometimes want to put our talents on display – wanting to impress others with what we can do. Like children, we sometimes want to have really flashy gifts, not understanding that they don't really benefit a whole lot of people.

Let us, therefore, listen intently to the Holy Spirit's encouragement for us this morning, under the theme: **Be Eager to Edify Others** 1) Not every spiritual gift accomplishes this purpose. 2) Ask God to help you excel in the ones that do.

Part One: Not every spiritual gift edifies others.

Our sermon text is part of a greater instruction the apostle Paul wrote to a congregation in Corinth regarding spiritual gifts. It seems as if the Lord had blessed select members of that congregation with some impressive spiritual gifts: one of them being the ability to speak in tongues.

What exactly was that gift? Truth be told, we can't say for certain. One theory is that it was the miraculous ability to speak the Gospel in actual foreign languages, just like the apostles were enabled to do at Pentecost. Another theory suggests that the language spoken by the people was some euphoric heavenly language – unknown on earth.

Regardless of the form this spiritual gift took, there is one thing we can say about it: it really impressed the Christians in Corinth – so much so that it became a prominent focus of their attention. Many of those who had the gift of tongue-speaking bragged about it – interrupting worship whenever the spirit moved them to speak or sing in a language that possibly no one else understood. Those who didn't have the gift of speaking tongues were tempted to feel like “lesser” Christians – often desiring this gift to prove that they were just as god pleasing and special as those who possessed it.

And do you know what the greatest problem was in this entire mess? The Corinthians' attention was no longer focused on Jesus and the forgiving, undeserved love he showed them through his cross. Their attention was focused on themselves, the gifts they possessed and the wonders they could do. The Gospel of Christ was being obscured.

The problem did not lie in God's gift of speaking in tongues, but in the misunderstanding and misuse of that gift. God has showered a variety of gifts upon his church. Some gifts were specifically given to edify and assist the person to whom they were given. Other gifts were given to edify the Church as a whole – directing everyone to Christ. The Holy Spirit encourages us to prayerfully pursue these latter gifts, as the Apostle Paul writes:

*Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.*

The church is not a place to show off what you can do – impressing others with your talents. It is a place where we both encourage and are encouraged as we worship Christ together: rejoicing in His saving work for us as we lovingly follow his command to love each other, just as he has loved us. God wants us to build each other up in Christ – something that only the Gospel can do.

<sup>13</sup> *For this reason anyone who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret what he says.*

<sup>14</sup> *For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.*

For the Corinthian congregation, speaking in tongues was no counterfeit miracle. It truly was a gift from God. Based on Paul's words, it seems as if “tongue speaking” brought joy and peace to the speaker. The problem is that, by itself, that's all it brought. Maybe we can compare it to the effect music often has on a person. Music is a wonderful gift of God. It often brings joy and solace to the heart. But music – as wonderful as it is – cannot strengthen a person's faith without intelligible words attached to it.

Let me illustrate what I mean by singing a verse of a well-known hymn in Latin.

Veni clavis Davidica!  
Regna reclude coelica,  
Fac iter Tutum superum,  
Et claude vias Inferum.  
Gaude, gaude, Emmanuel  
nascetur pro te, Israel.

I can assume that you all recognized the melody and that, for many of you, that it brought comfort. But did you understand what I sang? Was your faith strengthened? Did you perceive the Gospel as you prayed for the LORD's mercy? How could you unless you: 1) either know Latin or 2) had the hymn verse translated.

Let me confess something to you: as much as I enjoyed singing the Latin hymn verse to you, the words that came from my lips gave me no other benefit – other than “the feeling” I got singing them. Why? Because I don't know Latin. I need someone to interpret the words for me. Based on what Paul says in our text, we can assume that the same was true for many who were given the gift of speaking in tongues.

*<sup>15</sup> So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind.*

In other words, Paul doesn't want the Corinthians merely to focus on the feeling and comfort they got speaking in tongues. He wanted the Corinthians to use this gift in association with the Gospel – asking the LORD to give them understanding to what they were saying – so that they themselves might be truly edified.

And that brings us to the next point Paul wanted to make about this gift of speaking in tongues: while it certainly was a wonderful gift to have, its purpose seems to have been more for the encouragement of the person speaking himself, than it was for the congregation as a whole. St. Paul explains why:

*<sup>16</sup> If you are praising God with your spirit, how can one who finds himself among those who do not understand say “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? <sup>17</sup> You may be giving thanks well enough, but the other man is not edified.*

Paul's point is simply this: unless a person understands what you are saying, he can't give his “amen” – a word that means “truth” and conveys agreement to what has been confessed. Regardless of how beautiful or impressive it was to hear a fellow Christian exercise this spiritual gift, the observer would receive no spiritual benefit from it!

Now, some of you might be thinking: “That's all fine and dandy, pastor, but what does this have to do with us? None of us are tongue speakers – at least, not that we know of.” While it may be true that the specifics of this text don't necessarily apply to our situation, the principles this text teaches still do. What principles are they? That we understand that not every spiritual gift edifies others, and to prayerfully pursue the ones that do.

Let me illustrate what I mean. A super smart pastor might be tempted to showcase his command of the English language in every sermon. But what good would that be if no one understands the vocabulary he employs? A musician might play complex music – showcasing her ability to God's glory. But what good is it if no one can sing along, or the words of the song don't point to Christ? A church can have the most beautiful liturgical forms, but what good are they if they aren't explained – if people don't understand what all the symbolism means?

We need to be constantly asking ourselves the question – is my use of a particular spiritual gift in the congregation edifying others, or am I just drawing attention to myself? For, while it is certainly important to use the spiritual gifts God has given us, we must remember that not every gift automatically edifies others. For this reason, the LORD wants us to prayerfully pursue the ones that do – trusting that he will answer our prayers.

Part Two: Ask God to help you excel in the ones that do.

Paul wrote: <sup>18</sup> *I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.* <sup>19</sup> *But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.*

<sup>20</sup> Compared to Paul, the Corinthians had nothing to brag about. The LORD truly blessed the apostle with many spiritual gifts. How did he use them? Certainly not to draw attention to himself, but to point to Christ in everything.

Just think, other than this brief passage, in which Paul confesses that he speaks in tongues better than any of the Corinthians, we would have never known this fact about him. Paul knew that the gift of speaking in tongues was not given to edify others, but to encourage himself. For this reason, it seems, the apostle kept this gift of tongue speaking under wraps – desiring his speech to be intelligible rather than beautiful.

Yes, being able to convey the Gospel in simple, understandable speech truly is a gift from God. I often wonder in amazement how many Christian Preschool and Sunday School teachers God has gifted with this ability. And what a gift it is – to share the Gospel with children in a simple way that they can understand it. This is the kind of gift we should celebrate and pursue. Why? Because this is how the God's people are edified as we are led to see our sins, repent, and trust in Jesus as our Savior for full forgiveness.

For this reason, Paul writes: *Brothers, stop thinking like children.* That is to say: stop using the gifts God has given you to draw attention to yourself. Stop being jealous about the gifts God has given another Christian, but hasn't given you.

*In regard to evil be infants* – that is to say, mimic the innocence young children have regarding the evil that surrounds us. It perfectly ok if people make fun of you for not getting the dirty joke they told, or for not having played the latest violent video game, or read the best selling romance novels. It's good to be as innocent as infants in regard to those things . . .

*but in your thinking be adults* – that is to say, understand what truly matters: not our glory, but Christ's. Learn from Scripture what truly edifies others in the Church, and prayerfully pursue those gifts - gifts that all deal with sharing God's Word with others in a way that allows them to grasp it's meaning and believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. Pray that the LORD gives this spiritual gift to you and others - trusting that the LORD will answer your prayers, all in accordance to his good and gracious will. Amen.