

A Church Alive – The Motivation of the Spirit

Pursue love and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him. However, in the Spirit he speaks mysteries. But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. – 1 Corinthians 14:1-3

Recap from Last Week

Nicodemus came to Jesus, claiming to understand him because of what he saw, but Jesus wanted to show him more. Jesus wanted to show him, not just who *He* was, but who *Nicodemus* could be in the kingdom of God. Jesus was not focused on himself, but rather on providing Nicodemus what he needed.

Jesus further told Nicodemus that the inhabitants of the kingdom were not like what he was used to. What he was searching for was not going to be determined in a nice neat package, something he could build a teaching or discipline around. Life in the Spirit was very much like the wind – you could not tell where it came from or where it went. Nicodemus would have to begin to think differently about what he knew about living, about righteousness, even about Jesus.

Nicodemus wanted specifics on how the transformation could take place. What the steps were that he would have to do in order to facilitate the transformation into the life that Jesus was advocating. Jesus moved him away from his thinking about himself, and focused him on what would be done for him by the Spirit.

For us, it is not for us to facilitate the activity of the Spirit, but rather understand that because we have the mind of Christ, we can understand the moving of the Spirit. Because we can understand it, we are able to flow with it, in the same way that sailors are able to capture the wind in their sails.

The Right Thing the Wrong Way

The Corinthian church, as we learned was a church that knew the typical operation of the church, and as Paul put it, “came behind in no gift”. They were active, knowledgeable, and pursuing God but in some respects were doing the right thing the wrong way. Paul’s entire letter was to set things right in the church to get them focused on the right things, and pursuing the things of God with the right heart.

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that you were Gentiles, carried away to these dumb (without sound) idols, however you were led. Therefore I make known to you that no one

speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. – I Corinthians 12:1-3

Paul starts his discussion of the spiritual gifts with some basic things the Corinthian church was getting wrong: they were “prophesying”, but their prophecies were not biblical truth. They had been used to following whatever idol was there to follow, and they followed them not thinking about the fact that the idols *couldn't speak* (“aphonos” = “without sound”). So when they came into the life of the Spirit, they never distinguished what they were hearing from God, and what was coming from *other sources*. (Think Elijah challenging the 400 prophets of Baal... they prophesied from morning to night, but there was no answer:

*And when midday was passed **they prophesied** until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice. **But there was no voice, no answer no one paid attention.** – I Kings 18:29*

They were just happy to be prophesying but the result was confusion in their theology and their practices. They were in the right place, and basically trying to do the right thing, but it came out all wrong. Looking deeper into Paul's letter to them, we see that much of their focus was not because they were really pursuing God for who He was, but because they were looking for their own personal benefit.

*Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord even the demons are subject to us in your name. And He said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold I give you authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. **Nevertheless do not rejoice in this**, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven.” – Luke 10:17-20*

Interestingly enough, they didn't come back saying, “Lord, we saw this woman healed” or “Lord these people were delivered” ... Similarly with the Corinthian church, they were excited about *what* they were doing, but not the *real why* of the activity. Jesus addressed the excitement of the disciples over the fact that they were able to do miraculous things by refocusing them on what was really important – not that what they were doing was not important. Jesus needed them to be grounded in truth... the truth that they were sealed, part of the kingdom of God, and that they had opportunity to *help others experience that same new life*.

The Right Motivation

But earnestly desire the best gifts and yet I show you a more excellent way. Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal... - I Corinthians 12:31 – 13:1

To Paul, as great as the gifts were, without the right motivation and focus, they were nothing more than confusing noise. Furthermore, Paul was dealing with the Corinthians' greatest desire: personal worth. Paul told them that without the right motivation, it wouldn't be the gifts that have no value: it would be **them**. Similarly for us, we can do all of the right things to make us feel that we have achieved a level

of righteousness or spirituality, but until we are operating in love, even if the things yield results, they are of no real benefit to the person doing them.

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, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned but have not love, it profits me nothing. – I Corinthians 13:2-3

Paul starts out this section outlining the gifts that the Corinthian church is all too familiar with, but then speaks of them in a way that they had not considered.

Understanding the Motivation of Love

It is easy to say that we need to love, and just as easy to say that we actually do love someone. Peter wanted to demonstrate his proficiency with the concept of forgiveness by presenting what to any Jew of that time would have been not just an acceptable number of times to forgive, but the ultimate amount: 7 times.

Then Peter came to him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." – Matthew 18:22

Peter thought he understood righteousness, justice and love, but Jesus showed him it was so much more than his original thought. Similarly, Paul showed the Corinthian church the characteristics they were supposed to show in each of the situations they encountered:

Love suffers long and is kind. Love does not envy. Love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. – I Corinthians 13:4-7

The Corinthian church was to apply these characteristics to their dealings with each other, and every time they thought about moving in a gift. For us, it is just as easy to say we love, but much harder to put it into practice. So how do we begin to live a life of love, and operate in the Spirit?

One Coin... Two Sides

One concept in Greek that does not translate well to English is that of "on the one hand, on the other hand". In English, we see it as a contrast, where one would choose one over the other, like choosing which path to take to get to a certain goal. In Greek however, it is not so much a comparison, as it is a displaying of the two. This is the case when Paul talks about how we go about living this life of love:

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The words “pursue” and “desire” conjure up ideas of “nice to have”, not do not capture the essence of the attitude the Corinthians, and we should have toward both love and the gifts:

- **Pursue** literally means to run after with the mindset to overtake; it is so intense that it could be considered harassment. We are to be going after love with everything we have, with one aim: to capture it, grab hold of it, and never let it go. This is not just in general, but also in every situation we find ourselves in.
- **Desire** means to be zealous over a thing. To burn inside with thoughts of that particular thing. There is an author, Reza Aslan, who wrote a book about Jesus, entitled “Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth”. In the book, he writes about the cultural “man” Jesus, and how he was as a man on the earth. Jesus was not a passive nice guy with a nice message that everyone liked. Jesus was a man who was executed for crimes against the state – this is how zealous he was for what God was doing in him.

For Paul, pursuing love and being zealous for the gifts were like two tools in the hand of one master craftsman. Both worked together for the glory of God and for the benefit of those involved. When we are willing to pursue love, not only of God, but of each other, and require the manifestation of God in the lives of the people around us, then we are able see God moving freely to bring life to the church