

The Gift of Love

1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

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Every once in a while, I come across books on church growth. Every book and author seems to have excellent ideas on how to grow your church and make your church look vibrant and busy. Many have come up with their successful A-B-C formula to make your church the best church in the world. I have learned a number of techniques and skills that help me in my leadership. I won't deny the fact that these techniques and skills are essential in leading today's church. But, I cannot help thinking that a lot of these church growth strategies focus on the outlook of a church and miss the substance of the church. Imagine if your family is run based on the techniques and skills that a promise happy and successful family. So, what is the substance?

Paul says in today's reading, "I will show you a still more excellent way." The Corinthian church was known to have many problems, including factions in the church, discrimination against the poor, pride and jealousy related to spiritual gifts, theological incongruence on topics like bodily resurrection, Christian attitude towards nonbelievers and other faiths, some church members' sexual immorality, a legal suit, and many more. Don't these sound like many of the problems today's church faces as well? Now, Paul addresses each issue thoroughly in his letter, but in the high point of his letter, he highlights this one key principle, which he seems to suggest that precedes everything else. It seems to me that Paul strongly believes, even if we have everything else right and sound, without love all will be in vain.

Some will say, "Well, that's exaggeration." Paul decides to give a few examples to argue his point, and I believe these examples are not exaggeration, but somewhat reflect the status of the Corinthian church. What I mean is that the Christians at the Corinthian church may have been measuring wrong things for church growth. Because what you think is essential becomes what you want to pursue and what you want to be, and you will measure and judge everything by what you think is essential. Therefore, what you measure is going to be what you are going to become. And the Corinthian Christians measured their success and church growth against wrong things.

Some of them measured their growth by types of language they could speak. Some were very eloquent in speaking. For example, a leader named Apollos was good at preaching and many people looked up to him. Some began to say, "I belong to Apollos" while others said, "I belong to Paul," who was not so good at preaching but founded the Corinthian church (c.f. 1 Corinthians 3:4-9). Some believed the eloquent words of wisdom were the most essential in our Christian faith and church. To them, Paul had to respond and say, "My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). Some Christians in the Corinthian church believed speaking in angelic tongues was the most essential in our Christian faith and church. When someone spoke fluently in the language that no one else could speak, people looked up to him

and envied him (1 Corinthians 14:2). They considered those who were able to speak in angelic tongues first-class Christians. To these two groups of people, Paul gave shocking news: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1). In other words, all these eloquent words of wisdom and the gift of speaking in tongues does not add any value to our Christian faith and growth if there isn’t love in them.

Then, there were those who believed that the essence of our Christian faith and growth lay in the demonstration of powers. After all, didn’t Paul himself argue that his proclamation was not with the words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power (c.f. 1 Corinthians 2:4-5)? Didn’t Jesus say that “For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you” (Matthew 17:20)? You see, as I said earlier, all of these things are essential too; Paul is not denying that these things are needed. But, Paul is arguing that there is something that precedes all these things, and that is love. He says, “And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2). You see, I think it is possible for someone to do so many wondrous things in the world for the Lord and yet is denied by the Lord at Judgment. Jesus says, “On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’” (Matthew 7:22-23). Jesus is not denying here that their works were for the Lord; they were clearly done for the Lord and in the name of the Lord. But, he says they are false prophets, “who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (7:15). In other words, they look great outside – even work for the Lord and his kingdom – but there is no presence and love of God inside them. Paul in today’s reading is arguing we cannot measure our Christian faith and growth by the demonstration of God’s power and wonders, because, as much as they serve the kingdom of God, they do not necessarily reveal what’s in people’s hearts and minds, which is what God is really after.

Then, there were those who measure everything by the level of commitment and sacrifice. Again, I think there is nothing wrong with valuing commitment and sacrifice. Didn’t Jesus say himself “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23)? Didn’t Paul himself often urge his followers to imitate him in commitment (c.f. Philippians 3:17)? Paul is not overlooking the importance of commitment. Again, there is something that precedes commitment, and that is love. It’s interesting in John 13 that Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). We all know that this is not a new commandment. Did Jesus all a sudden forget one of the greatest commandments he selected, “Love your neighbour as yourself”? It is not a new commandment when we consider its desired actions in our behaviours. But, it is a new commandment when we consider the way it will motivate people to act its desired actions. Prior to Jesus, one was to love others by committing oneself. But, Jesus says, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” He wants us to receive his love and do the same to others. It’s no longer the commitment out of self-will; it’s willing commitment out of being moved by the Lord’s extravagant love.

I believe this portion of Paul's letter to the Corinthians on love is still relevant to us today. After all, there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9). We still make the same mistake by measuring ourselves and our faith against (what I call) the secondary gifts. Paul says, "But strive for the greater gifts" (1 Corinthians 12:31), which is the gift of love. What about you? How do you measure your life and your faith and your faith community? Can you perhaps take some time this week and honestly ask yourself what your heart is honestly after? Is it wisdom and knowledge? Is it power and mystery? Is it faith and demonstration of God's wonders? Don't throw these away; but, see and find ways for you to strive for the greater gift, the gift of love.

I want to finish with my personal story, and this is about the time when I sensed God's call to a ministry. In December 2007, I experienced God's powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon me at home during reading of the Bible. I received the gift of tongues along with many other gifts. I was able to understand and expound the Scripture like never before; I knew this was a spiritual gift given to me, because there was such a dramatic change at the level of my understanding of the Scripture and the ability to expound on it between the time before this experience and after it; all my friends at my Bible study group were surprised. I began to see the signs of miracles and healings when I prayed for other people. I began to literally live at the church; after my university classes, I came to church for ministries (at the time I was involved in prayer group, Bible study, praise band and translation in Korean Ministry) and usually spent late nights and early mornings in praying for the church. I was everything Paul was describing in the first three verses of 1 Corinthians 13. But, I began to experience burn out. My commitment to the church became burdensome to me. I was sharing my wisdoms on the Scripture a lot, but somehow I felt empty. I prayed for other people, not because I had a genuine and divine compassion for them, but because I wanted to see God's wonders and miracles. Eventually, I became somebody who seemed so great on appearance, but so empty and dry inside.

Then, one day, during a prayer meeting, someone else became filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. As I was watching this person being filled with the Holy Spirit, inside me I was so angry and jealous. "God, how can you fill that person so much while you let me run dry?" I came home that evening and prayed with so much anger to God. I said, "God, you have to fill me again with your love and power; until then, I won't give up." Then, I went into a washroom for a shower. As water sprayed on my hair, I began to feel the love of God covering over me; but, it wasn't God's love towards me; it was God's love towards the people in this church. He made me experience in my heart how much God loves his people in this church. I knelt in the shower booth and said how sorry I was, being so selfish. There, I realized there is something that precedes everything I had and everything I was after.

People of God, as we go through this sermon series on love, God is inviting us to experience his extravagant love. This love is what makes us who we are; this love is what we are after; this love is what we want to be known by; this love is what remains and what is the greatest. May God bless you today with this gift of love. Amen.