

CELEBRATING AN EXCELLENT CHRISTMAS

IN WORD AND DEED

We have just completed our series of sermons on Spiritual Gifts.

Where are you going with your gift or gifts?

What are you doing with the gifts God has given?

What a shame to respond to the gift with an expression of mild interest.

How tragic to say something like, "That's nice" and then lay it aside.

Or, to say to our Gift-Giver, "You really shouldn't have."

Paul's teachings on the gifts of the Spirit percolate out of turmoil.

The Corinthian church is boiling over with tension.

There is sexual impurity of the worst kind.

All sexual impurity is sin but these people took it to new lows.

A man took up with his father's wife. (5:1)

Paul said they were being arrogant toward God by sanctioning this. (5:2)

Greed, drunkenness, immorality, thievery had infiltrated the church. (5:11)

Some were hungry after their love feasts while some were full. (11:20-21)

They were unspiritual or spiritually immature. (2:14, 3:1)

I touched last week on the leadership issues. (1:11-12)

People were suing each other in court over a grievance. (6:1)

There was jealousy and strife among them (3:3)

Some were arrogant (4:18)

There were divisions among them (11:18)

They were puffed up and bragged that they were good. (4:6-7)

They failed to give glory and credit to God.

And they were profaning Jesus Himself through communion. (11:27)

"Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord."

Paul said do not dare to eat and drink in an unworthy manner.

You are using profanity if you do that.

You might as well take the name of the Lord in vain.

You are trying to dunk Jesus in your digestive cesspool sin.

Jesus refuses to have any participation in your sin.

Don't drag Jesus into your distortion of a holy life.

Every time Paul blinked another sin-disaster spilled out.

It was almost like following a toddler around the house.

Before one mess is cleaned up another is started.

Paul's writing could hardly keep up with their behavior.

He was incredulous.

He could hardly believe the church had become so un-Christ-like.

Amazingly, Paul was not ready to give up on the church in Corinth.

With each blink he also saw the beauty the Church could experience.

But there was only one way that beauty would manifest.

There has always been only one answer to chaos and corruption.

Since before creation there has been only one answer.

Only the moving of the Spirit of God has the power to transform.

Paul said that only the Holy Spirit can penetrate worldly influences.

"And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." (1 Corinthians 2:3-4)

"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him," God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God ... no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God." (1 Corinthians 2:9-12)
"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. ... For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are." (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17b)
"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (1 Cor. 12:7)

Paul encourages those who struggle spiritually to embrace the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God's great gift to the church.

It pained him to watch their spiritual poverty.

He did not address these things to cause them pain but to prevent pain.

It is sin running amuck in our lives that causes pain in life.

Paul was drawing out the infection of their sinful behavior.

He was digging at the slivers of sin that were festering.

He could see the destruction that sin was causing.

He could not let it go unchecked.

He was not digging with a spiritual needle unnecessarily.

It was required for the church to be spiritually healthy.

He explained this in the second letter he wrote to them.

"For I wrote you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you." (2 Corinthians 2:4)

Paul confirmed his confidence in the Holy Spirit.

God "has put His seal upon us and given us His Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee." (2 Corinthians 1:22)

Paul wanted them to experience a more excellent way to live.

His desire for them was spiritual growth that leads to maturity.

He wanted them to be the cream that rises to the top.

The Holy Spirit makes that a reality by pouring Jesus' love into them.

"And hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, which has been given to us." (Romans 5:5)

Paul described the beauty the spiritual gifts bring to the church.

"But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." (1 Corinthians 12:24b-26)

That becomes reality by the more excellent way of love.

Anything done in the name of God without love is the church's form of worldliness.

The only way to experience the excellent way is through the Holy Spirit.

And there is no shortage of the Holy Spirit.

In these days He has been poured out on all flesh.

The Holy Spirit makes God's kingdom of majesty a reality today.

Right here, right now, God's Spirit is working.

He is working to bring excellence to our lives.

The birth of Jesus was the pivotal moment that changed this reality.

Jesus' birth was the perfect merging of earth and heaven.

The writer to the Hebrews put it this way.

"but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things through whom also He created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature, upholding the universe by His word of power. When He had made purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high," (Hebrews 1:2-3)

Paul put it this way.

"He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities - all things were created through Him and for Him. ... For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross." (Colossians 1:13-16, 19-20)

Paul begins this 13th chapter of Corinthians with this in mind.

1 Corinthians 13 is the description of God's unconditional love.

Paul describes three scenarios.

The first is speaking with the tongues of men and angels.

I could have a message from God Himself.

But if that message was not birthed in love it would have little effect.

I could speak with eloquence and people would hear "blah, blah, blah."

I would be an orchestra of gongs that would leave people deaf.

The second is prophetic powers and mountain moving faith.

Without love I might command a mountain to move and end up squishing someone.

I could understand perfectly the struggles of others.

But without love I could say nothing that would bring healing or freedom.

I could have knowledge to see a life careening out of control.

But without love any guidance I gave would not alter the direction of life.

The third is to be generous and self sacrificial.

I could die on a cross like Jesus.

But without love, nothing changes.

I could eliminate poverty but, without love, nothing changes.

No matter what noble work we may do, it will be deficient without love.

I hate to even entertain the thought of how often I have sounded like that.

How often have my expressions of faith been loveless?

How often have I tried to intercede or intervene and made matters worse?

God is telling us that without love we can be nothing like Jesus.

We can put our faith in Him and trust in Him.

We can reiterate His truth and replicate His sacrifice.

But people will not see Jesus if it is done without love.

Does God's love really make a difference?

It did for the church in Corinth.

The Corinthians discovered that love transforms effort into excellence.

In love everything is flavored with excellence.

In love our actions are directed by the mind of Christ.

Philippians 2 is worth hearing again.

"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ... Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus."

(Philippians 2:1-2, 5)

Do you really want to be a noisy gong and clanging cymbal - I don't!

Do you really want have all faith and be nothing - I don't!

Do you really want to give everything away in futility - I don't!

Invite the Holy Spirit to pour God's love into your heart.

Launch into the fullness of the Spirit

That is what brings us to this Communion Table.

The love of God is evident in the bread and cup.

They reflect to us His perfect love for us.

At the Communion Table, trivial, human effort grinds to a halt.

Here is the expression of God's perfect love for us.

Jesus gave everything for His disciples and the church.

He lived the perfect, sinless life in the power of the Spirit.

He lived that life so He could be our sacrifice.

The Lord's Table reminds us how Jesus lived.

The Lord's Table calls us to live in the same Spirit of power.

By receiving, we join Jesus in that expression of excellence.

In love every word and action brings excellence.