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1 Corinthians 14:1-25

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Text

[1] Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. [2] For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. [3] On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. [4] The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. [5] Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

[6] Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? [7] If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played? [8] And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? [9] So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air. [10] There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning, [11] but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me. [12] So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

[13] Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. [14] For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. [15] What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. [16] Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying? [17] For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up. [18] I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. [19] Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

[20] Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. [21] In the Law it is written, “By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.” [22] Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. [23] If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that

you are out of your minds? [24] But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, [25] the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

Intro:

- Arouse Interest:
 - Over my lifetime, I've had the opportunity to interact with some pretty smart people. I've realized that some people are just playing a higher level of chess than I am, and I just gotta be okay with that.
 - I remember I was working at a summer camp one year, and this other camp counselor, she was talking to me about "pure mathematics." From the little I could understand, pure mathematics is pure precisely because it has absolutely no application to real-life problems at all. It is math above and beyond our current level of scientific understanding.
 - Perhaps, someday, some of these mathematical principles will have some applicability in the future. But if you ask someone who is into this level of math what they could potentially do with it, they start to cringe. That's not the point. The point is the purity of the math. It's just the fact that we can do this.
- Surface Needs
 - Now, I appreciate the beauty of discovery in and of itself. I do think part of the way God designed us is to explore and discover different aspects of the world. There is a beauty in the work itself, so to speak.
 - But there are times in life when this level of abstraction just kinda frustrates me. Like when my buddy can tell me about the different sizes of infinity, but they can't help me convert from metric to the imperial system. There's a level of frustration that the common man feels at this point.
 - How is any of that useful to me right now?
 - I know it's not good to reduce all of life to that which is useful, but I still think occasionally, for all of us, with whatever gifts we have, we all oughta step back just every once in a while and ask, what good are my gifts to the people around me? How can I be helpful?
- Orient to Text:
 - After his beautiful description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul once again returns to the question of spiritual gifts in chapter 14. In effect, Paul is trying to apply the principles of love to the practice of spiritual gifts within the church body.
 - Here in Chapter 14, Paul tackles the one spiritual gift the Corinthians seem to love the most, the gift of tongues. When it comes to the gift of tongues,

how does Paul want love to lead their practice? And what can Paul teach us today about what it looks like to use our gifts for the greater good of others today?

- The argument that Paul lays out for us in our text today is simple: ***Christians ought to speak in church to serve the church.***

Organizational Sentence:

- The structure of this passage is pretty clear. First Paul lays out the principle of the matter in verses 1-5. After that, Paul has two practical applications: one for believers in verses 6-12 and one for unbelievers in verse 13-25.

The Principle of the Matter (1-5)

- So what is the principle of the matter here? Look with me at verse 1 of 1 Corinthians 14.
 - [1] Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.
- Paul is helpful in balancing out this conversation here. If you only looked at chapter 13, it might seem like Paul thinks spiritual gifts in general are bad, and that the thing you really need in life is love to serve the church. But Paul doesn't say that. Paul says that you should desire spiritual gifts here, especially the gift of prophecy. And you should especially desire the gift of prophecy, specifically because it is one of the best gifts you can lovingly use to serve others.
- Notice the clean contrast that Paul draws between tongues and prophecy in verses 2-4.
 - V.2 The one who speaks in a tongue, speaks not to men but to God.
 - V.3 The one who prophesies, speaks to people for their up building and encouragement and consolation.
 - v.4 the one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself.
 - v.4 the one who prophesies builds up the church.
- So we see the contrast Paul is bringing up here. Tongues builds myself up, but prophecy builds up those around me.
- And what is the conclusion of the matter? Verse 5:
 - [5] Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.
- In other words, if you are seeking to love the people around you, you ought to pursue the gifts that lead to the edification of others, not just yourself.

Application

- The principle of the matter is simple enough. But it doesn't answer the hard question, does it? What is the gift of prophecy? And what is the gift of tongues?

Prophecy

- Pastor Nathan did a good job explaining the gift of prophecy in 1 Corinthians 12:27-31. I would commend that to you, and I'm not going to spend as much time on that today. I do agree with him that categorically, prophets are those who supernaturally receive direct divine revelatory messages from God.
- And I personally think that that kind of category of revelation has ceased, or at the very least is not the normative way that the Lord speaks to his people today.
 - I get this from Ephesians 2:20 where the apostle and prophets are grouped together to be the foundation of the church. And if we no longer have apostles today, it would make sense that we no longer have any prophets either. You only need to lay a foundation one time.
 - Hebrews 1:1-2 says that while God formerly spoke to his people through the prophets, in these last days, he has spoken to us through his Son, Jesus Christ. If Jesus is the climax of God's revelation to us, then it would make sense that the former ways he spoke to us are at the very least, unnecessary for those of us who have Christ today.
 - This isn't a direct argument, but it's helpful for me to think about. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 Paul tells Timothy at the end of his life:
 - [16] All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, [17] that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.
 - In other words, the Word of God is enough for you to be everything that God wants you to be. It seems to be that if we need another source of direct divine revelation from God today for us to be the people that God wants us to be, then it seems that 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is not true. The Scriptures are not enough for the man of God to be complete, equipped for every good work.
 - Now, this doesn't mean that God can't use impressions. I still believe that the Holy Spirit can supernaturally use the Bible in very specific ways in the life of God's people. There are stories of Spurgeon preaching and getting really detailed about a certain application and people coming to

him after the service asking him, “How did you know that that was going on in my life specifically?”¹

- Friend, if you’re praying for someone, and you think the Lord is impressing you to share a biblical truth with that person, I think it’s okay to share it with them.
- I just would never say in that scenario that I have a word from the Lord for you. I think that is very dangerous. If someone claimed to have a word from the Lord for you, I think you have every right to ask that person, “Show me where you got that in the Bible.”

Tongues

- Alright, what’s going on with these tongues?
- To get at this topic, we have to answer two questions. First, what are tongues? And second, do we have tongues today?
- So first, what are they?
- Some scholars say that tongues simply are human languages. This is the common way the Greek term *glossia* is understood.
- This is also the way supernatural tongues seem to be operating in the book of Acts. You can see this in Acts 2:4; 10:44-46; and 19:6. It is really clear in Acts 2 that God supernaturally gave some believers there the ability to speak the mighty works of God in other human languages. In Acts 10, the Gentiles seem to speak the same kinds of tongues as the Jews did in Acts 2, and their languages also seemed to be understood by some of the people around them. Acts 19 doesn’t give a lot of details about how tongues functioned then, but if two of the three cases of speaking in tongues were just other human languages, it would make sense that the third would also just be another case of human languages.
- So if this is how tongues seemed to operate in Acts, it would make sense that this is also how tongues ought to operate in 1 Corinthians as well.
- Other scholars say that when you compare how tongues operate in Acts vs how it functions in 1 Corinthians, they seem to be very different. Paul himself seems to argue in 1 Corinthians 12:10 that there are various different kinds of tongues.
- Rather than a public declaration, Paul argues that the kind of tongues that were functioning in Corinth were a private prayer between an individual and God (1 Cor. 14:2).
- Paul also assumed that none of the visitors coming to church would be able understand these kinds of tongues, and they would call the Corinthians out of their

¹ “Did Charles Spurgeon Have the Gift of Prophecy? | Core Christianity,” n.d., <https://corechristianity.com/resources/episodes/did-charles-spurgeon-have-the-gift-of-prophecy-> “Did Charles Spurgeon Have the Gift of Prophecy?” Thomas R. Schreiner, *Spiritual Gifts: What They Are and Why They Matter* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2018).

mind (1 Cor. 14:23). This is why Paul limits the use of tongues in the gathered assembly to be practiced only when someone can interpret for them (1 Cor. 14:27-28).

- In light of these differences, some people argue that there is a version of tongues that is not a human language. Some people pull in 1 Cor. 13:1, where Paul talks about speaking in tongues of men or of angels to justify some sort of heavenly language that cannot be understood by anyone unless they are supernaturally given the gift of interpretation.
- What are we to make of this? Personally, I think the distinctions between Acts 2 and 1 Cor. 14 are a bit overstated.
- While Paul does talk of tongues as a private prayer here in our text, he also says in 1 Cor. 14:5 that tongues are just as edifying to others as prophecy if they are interpreted. This seems to correspond well to what happened in Acts 2.
- Furthermore, the response of unbelievers to uninterpreted tongues in 1 Cor. 14:23 seems really similar to the response of the Jews who couldn't understand the different languages in Acts 2:13. The unbelievers called them mad men, while the Jews called them drunk.
- Also, the very idea of someone interpreting tongues seems to suggest that these languages are not simply ecstatic speech. It seems like they do have intelligibility that can be understood and interpreted into another language.
- 1 Cor. 13:1 is interesting, but it seems that Paul is using hyperbolic language there to make an important point. Even if I speak in tongues of angels, if I don't have love, I'm useless to the people around me.
- Personally, I don't see any good reason to assume that what is happening in 1 Corinthians 14 is any different than what is happening in Acts 2. I think the various different kinds of tongues in 1 Cor. 12:10 would have just been read as various different kinds of languages.
- I also think there is a broader biblical-theological theme that supports tongues being other human languages. Several scholars have written on the fact that what is going on in Acts 2 is actually a reversal of the effects of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9. While God divided human languages as a means of holding back human sin, now in his new covenant, God is redeeming a people from every tongue, tribe, and nation. He is bringing people from all these language groups back together again, and reconciling all things to himself in Christ Jesus.²
 - This is one of the encouraging little side nuggets I found while studying for this sermon. According to Zephaniah 3:9, one day all of God's people will speak one language so that we can call upon the name of the Lord and

² Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2020).

serve him with one accord. That's the kind of unity all of God's people will have in heaven.

- So I'm not 100% certain about this, but generally speaking, I don't think what we see in 1 Cor. 14 is a version of tongues that is different than Acts 2.
- But now the real question. Are they around today? There isn't a Bible verse that I can point to to answer this definitively, but assuming that prophecies have ceased, it would make sense that tongues, which are placed on the same level as prophecy when interpreted (1 Cor. 14:5), have also ceased.
- This is just my opinion. I can't say definitively that tongues have ceased, but it seems likely to me.
- Now, irrespective of your position on spiritual gifts, I actually think 1 Corinthians 14 has a lot to say to all of us today, whether you're a cessationist or not.

Believers (6-12)

- Again, the main thing Paul is arguing here is that Christians speak in church to serve the church. And in verses 6-12, Paul is going to argue that one of the ways we serve the church is by being considerate of the ways we use our gifts to build up other brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Paul in verse 6, switches to using himself as an illustration. He writes:
 - [6] Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?
- Some scholars speculate that, potentially, Paul might have been looked down upon for not speaking in tongues with the Corinthian church when he was with them. But Paul brings up a practical point. If I did that, I would look awesome before you, but I wouldn't really be that useful to you.
- Paul could have used his gift of tongues in this way. In fact, in verse 18, Paul says he speaks in tongues more than any of them. But Paul doesn't use this flashy gift as a means of making himself look great. No, he chooses love. He chooses to speak in the church to serve the church.
- Paul lists three metaphors starting at verse 7, each of them worthy of reflection and meditation.
 - In verse 7, Paul argues that if a flute or harp plays but doesn't play distinctively, it won't be understood. The idea is similar to a symphony, but one instrument is out of sync with the rest of the performance. That's what tongues would be if it were simply done in an effort to show off.
 - In verse 8, Paul argues that if a bugle plays without concern for understanding, the army won't be ready for battle.

- Finally, in verse 10, Paul argues that if the Corinthians arrogantly flaunt their gift of tongues, they would inevitably make those who could not understand them feel like outsiders to their community.

Application

- Whether or not you speak in tongues yourself today, I think Paul's analogies have a lot to say to us today.
- Brothers and sisters, if you are gifted with a deep and emotional relationship with God today, does your love for God lead you to love his people? Or do you disparage your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who express their love for Christ in different ways than you do? Do you see yourself as part of the band? Or the soloist who is carrying the band?
- If you love the great doctrines of the faith, and are blessed with a keen intellect, are you using the great truths of heaven and hell, sin and salvation, Christ and his life, death, resurrection, and soon return as a means to spur one another up to greater love and faithfulness? Are you encouraging those who are weak and weary to trust in a sovereign God this morning? Or are you merely using these truths to make yourself look smart in front of others?
- Friend, in the use of your gifts, do you make other brothers and sisters in Christ feel like family at church or foreigners?
- I find the example of the apostle Paul really convicting for me this morning. Paul was smarter than everyone at this church. He had deeper spiritual experiences with the Lord than any of them. And the Corinthians never realized any of that simply because Paul chose to serve rather than show off.
- As Paul writes in 1 Cor. 2:1-2:
 - [1] And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. [2] For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.
- Friends, can that be said of us today?
- According to Paul in verse 12, if you are eager for the manifestation of the Spirit. If you want to see the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the church, you need to be about what the Holy Spirit is about, the building up of the body of Christ.

Unbelievers (13-25)

- So we've seen how Paul argues that we ought to use our gifts for believers, but now let's look at how Paul teaches we should use our gifts for unbelievers.
- Look with me starting at verse 13:
 - [13] Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. [14] For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is

unfruitful. [15] What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also. [16] Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say “Amen” to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?

- Keep in mind, Paul is arguing here specifically how we ought to use spiritual gifts within the context of the assembled church. How we ought to think of spiritual gifts when it comes to Sunday morning worship.
- It's a little hard to understand what Paul means by singing with your mind and spirit. But I think the general idea is still clear.
- Here, Paul argues that if we speak in tongues without an interpreter in a Sunday service, it may be edifying to me, but it won't be edifying to anyone around me. So, in church, Paul argues that we ought to pray and sing for the edification of others, not just ourselves.

Application

- When you think about it, this chapter has a lot to say about how churches ought to structure their services today.
- Here at Immanuel, we strive to design each Sunday morning service so that it will be useful to everyone here, not just myself.
 - This means we sing songs that aren't just edifying for me but for everyone. That aren't just singable for me but for everyone here.
 - This means in our liturgy, we try to reflect the great realities of the gospel in such a manner that everyone can understand it. We never want to water down the content of God's Word, but we do want to do our best to be as clear as possible as to what the Bible is saying to us today.
 - This is why in our liturgies, we work to explain what we are doing, not simply walk through the motions. We want you to know how the greatness of God ought to lead to our conviction of sin. How our confession can lead to assurance of pardon because of the finished work of Christ. And having that assurance, we want to now hear God himself speak in the preaching of his word so that we know how to respond in grateful obedience today.
- Friends, we want to be clear in what we are doing and why we are doing it. We especially want to do this, not simply for the believers among us today, but also for the unbelievers.

Explain

- The word for outsider in verse 16 is difficult to translate. Some Bible translations take this to mean ungifted. In other words, this would be a Christian who doesn't have the gift of tongues, and they can't join in the praise of those who are speaking in tongues.
- But the literal translation from the Greek is one who fulfills the position of the outsider. And there are many scholars who argue that these are unbelievers who are really interested in Christianity. Who are enquiring into the faith.³
- And if that's the case, then what Paul is saying here is really important for Christians to hear today.

Application

- Brothers and sisters, there are people who come to our church, who are here today, who don't know Jesus, but who are interested in what this whole Christianity thing is about. Who are intrigued by Jesus and want to know more about him.
- Friends, if you knew that your unbelieving loved one was coming to church today, how would that affect the way that you sing?
- Wouldn't you want to sing songs that clearly express the good news of the gospel to them again and again and again before the service was over? Wouldn't you want to sing with reverence and passion? Wouldn't you want them to know that we serve a great God who is worthy of our praise and adoration?
- Friends, when you pray in the service, wouldn't you want those who are interested in the faith to know that we serve a God who hears us when we cry out to him? Who is a good Father to us, his children? Who we can be confident will listen to our prayers because we have a great high priest in heaven?
- Beloved, the church ought to be the one place where people can look and catch a small glimpse of heaven. What are you communicating to those who are looking in from the outside this morning?

Explain

- The Apostle Paul wraps up his emphasis on clarity in the congregation in verse 20. He writes:
 - [20] Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. [21] In the Law it is written, “By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.” [22] Thus tongues

³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2014). See also Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries VOLUME 7 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018).

are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers.

- This is a weird argument, but an important one. Paul is quoting here from Isaiah 20:11-12. Here, God is rebuking Israel for constantly rejecting his teachings. He tried to be clear with them. To call them back from their idolatry. He cried out to them to repent of their sins and return to him, but they wouldn't come back.
- Because of their rejection, God will now speak to his people not with clarity, but with the words of a foreign tongue as the Assyrians come and take them away to exile.
- Paul uses this Old Testament prophecy to make a significant theological point. Clarity on the gospel is a gift from God.

Application

- Again, this has significance for how we as Christians ought to be thinking about how we are using our spiritual gifts within the church today. About how clear we are in our gospel presentation on Sunday morning.
- But this especially has application to those of you who have come here and who are not a Christian this morning.
- Whether you are interested in Christianity or you were simply dragged into this service by a really eager family member, I'm glad you're here today. I hope that all our work and effort put into this service this morning was not only edifying to us but somehow helpful for you.
- I hope that somehow, through this service, you heard of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came down and was born as a man to give his people the clearest picture of God we could have. Who showed us who God is by living the life we could not live, dying to pay the penalty for our sins we could not pay, and rising again from the dead so that he could promise all those who trust and follow him that one day, we too could rise and be with him.
- Friends, my earnest prayer for you is that through the clear portrait of Christ you too would be convicted of your sins. That you would turn from your sins and trust in Christ for his mercy and forgiveness. That you would see in Jesus the kind of God that you, too, are convinced is worthy of all our worship and praise. This is one of the main aims of our Sunday morning gatherings. To give you a clear picture of who Christ is.
- But you should just know, the prophecy that Paul quotes here in verse 21 is a double-edged sword. Clarity on the gospel is a gift, and what seems so clear to you today, may not be so clear to you tomorrow.
- Friend, if the Lord is prompting your heart today, if there's some business you need to take care of with God, take care of it today before you leave our church.

Talk to someone here today about what it means for you to trust and follow Christ today. Friends, this is why we're here. We're not here to look great. We're not here to lift ourselves up. No, we're here to serve others today, and to point sinners to Jesus Christ, a great Savior.