

“GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT: SO, WHAT YOU DOING TO DO?” I Corinthians 13: 1-13

We end our series on the Gifts of the Spirit today. And we end it with an interesting scripture passage: I Corinthians 13. The Love Chapter.

We know this chapter. We hear it particularly at weddings where it is used as two people become one in marriage - - now, faith, hope, love abide, these three - - but the greatest of these is love. It is always a rather tender and romantic notion when it is read.

And it is completely out of context at weddings. It is used incorrectly from its original setting in scripture. It is kind of plucked out of the Bible to make things sound good and comfortable.

I Corinthians 13 has nothing to do with love between two people. It has nothing to do with marriage. It has nothing to do with a wedding. And yet, we often misuse scripture in ways that fit our desires and feelings!

It does amaze me how people use scripture to justify their needs. How people misquote scripture to make a point. How we are very freewheeling with our understanding of the Bible. It has been said that religion is the opiate of the people. We use scripture as our drug when we need a certain fix.

Our passage from I Corinthians is all about spiritual gifts. It is located right between chapters 12 and 14 which both focus on spiritual gifts. It is as if Paul got distracted and inserted chapter 13 right between these two chapters on gifts. And I believe it provides us with a good conclusion on the matter of spiritual gifts.

I remind you of our definition of Spiritual Gifts:

Gifts of the Spirit are special abilities given by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit to empower believers for the ministries of the body.

We have learned that these gifts are the

effort and energy that enable the ministries of the church to exist and flourish. We have learned that the gifts are given by Christ. We cannot create them, but we can enhance them and develop them.

We have learned that these gifts are not a way to showcase ourselves but point beyond ourselves to a greater good and purpose.

We have learned that spiritual gifts are for the work of the church and that their focus is the building of the Kingdom of God.

All of which lead us up to this passage from I Corinthians. As we look at it, remember the topic Paul is addressing is spiritual gifts. That is our context which enables us to hear this message more clearly.

Verses 1-3:

Remember one of the spiritual gifts is speaking in tongues.

Another gift is prophecy

Another gift is knowledge

Still another is faith

Generosity was a gift

He is trying to alert the Corinthian people and the South Plains people that I could be the best speaker in tongues, have the greatest gift of prophecy and of knowledge. I would be the epitome of having faith and be the most generous giver.

But...without love, I am nothing. Zero. Nada.

When we talk about love it can become rather mushy and vague and anything goes! In other words, it can become rather meaningless.

In the Greek world, there were at least three kinds of love as there is in our world:

EROS was erotic love. It was sexual. It is about enjoyment of another in a marriage or a friendship. It can be genuine, and it can be meaningful. Yet the focus is on physical sexual interaction. Its shelf-life would be rather short term. For if that is all there is to love, it becomes empty and just another physical activity.

PHILIA is brotherly/sisterly love. Philadelphia the city of brotherly love. It refers to respect and acceptance of other human beings. It is about being good friends, companions, support of the human race and other people. It is how we get along in the world...through acceptance and respect for others. It can be deep personal relationships.

The love Paul is talking about in I Corinthians is AGAPE love. A sacrificial love that expects nothing in return. A love that is long lasting and desiring of nothing in return. A love that is for the sake of the other person and not for my sake. A love that is freely given that empowers others to be themselves and to be fulfilled.

Paul puts this type of love central in this chapter. He declares that you could have the best gift of all people and if it is not sacrificially used, it is nothing. It is meaningless. It is a fraud.

Paul is pushing the point that the use of our gifts is all about our motivation. Why are you doing what you are doing? What drives you to share your gifts? What's it all about?

I would even make the case that if you share your gifts because you feel obligated to do so and feel responsible, that would not be what Paul is addressing here. Why do you feel obligated? Who are you trying to impress or satisfy? What satisfaction are you seeking through the gifts you share?

He is pushing us in this chapter to examine our motivation, our purpose, our drive. He wants us to be honest, and I think he has a point.

This passage is a very humbling passage. For all of us do not always have pure motives. Because sin is lurking at our door, we take great pride in being noticed. We love for people to mention us or praise us for what we contribute. We are eager to please people. We seek approval from others!

None of which is bad or evil in itself. What is the error is that when we think we have all the answers; when we are so cocky that we know we are right; when we are not willing to listen to others, then our gifts are not being shared with the grace God has given us. When we seek out attention and want everyone to know what we are doing, then the greatest owner of a spiritual gift is a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Yet, Paul goes on to define what love is and what it is not. He defines what is good motivation for us and what is not.

Love – we – are patient and kind.

Love – we – are not jealous or boastful

Love – we – are not arrogant or rude

Love – we – do not insist on our own way.

Love – we – are not irritable or resentful.

Part of the problem here with Paul, I think, is that he has gone from preaching to meddling.

Who among us has not been patient? Who has not been jealous? Who has not been rude/ who has not insisted on our own way or been irritable or resentful?

I do not know about you, but I score 100 on all these traits at one time or another. After all, I have passion and drive. There are some things I think need to be done. I do object to others who run roughshod over other people.

Yet Paul is encouraging us in the church to practice these disciplines. To be patient. To be kind. To guard against our jealousy or resentfulness to others. To watch ourselves when we walk past someone without speaking. To control our irritableness.

For if we can practice these traits in the church, which is a safe and accepting place, maybe it will spill over into our daily life and family life. If what Paul is saying, that we catch ourselves in the church, we might do the same in the world. If we practice what we preach, what a tremendous witness that would be. What would happen if at South Plains we called each other on our irritableness or our rudeness or our lack of patience? Where else can that kind of love be demonstrated?

What Paul is declaring here is that living out our faith in community of the church will have an impact on the rest of the world. And such is the real meaning of spiritual gifts...they help us to live out a meaningful Christian life in all of our life.

Paul goes on to identify the positive side of love:

Love.... Bears all things

Believes all things

Hopes all things

Endures all things

Love never ends.

Then he makes a fascinating point: these spiritual gifts we have are not eternal!

Prophecies pass away

Tongues cease

Knowledge passes away and changes

Generosity ends

Administration changes

Hospitality adjusts

Think about the Spiritual Gifts you have...they are not forever. They may even change in your lifetime. You may discover other gifts.

BUT...love never ends. Love is always. Love endures. Love is long-suffering. Love is God: eternal!!

So for us in our Gifts, they are critical, and they are very important. In fact the gifts of the congregation called South Plains Presbyterian Church are what make this congregation who you are. With each member here sacred and holy and special. It is how God has gifted this congregation through the centuries of ministry.

And these two centuries have not always been easy. At one point, there was a question about the future of this congregation. Yet, God – LOVE – prevailed even when some people moved on or decided not to stay with the congregation. God did stay and here we are.

You stand at a junction peering into the scene. You have the Gifts. You have the Love. You have the Spirit.

So, what are you going to do? How will you use these God-given gifts that abound here?

And how will you be motivated? Why will you do what you do?

So, faith, hope, love abide, these three, but the greatest of these is love...may it be so in this place!