

Sermon – 15th Pentecost
I Corinthians 12:12-31 & Luke 11:9-13
September 2, 2018

“The Work of the Spirit – Gifts”

The Bible is not a handbook on economics, but it does contain references to treating workers fairly. Leviticus 19:13 says “*do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight*” and Malachi 3:5 warns of judgement on anyone who “*defrauded laborers of their wages.*” I say this because by the late 1800’s in America our country was in the midst of the great “Industrial Revolution”, yet thousands of Americans routinely worked 7 day weeks and 12 hour or more days in factories but were barely paid enough to eke out a living. However, the great industrialists of that era - John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, and J.P. Morgan in particular – gifted men to be sure - amassed tremendous wealth.

The result was no little social unrest in our country. Eventually a “labor movement” was formed to advocate fair wages and safer working conditions for worker and in 1894 Congress approved the first national “Labor Day.” The labor movement had many worthy goals but its inspiration was the conviction that no worker’s contribution was insignificant and success should be shared.

I Corinthians was written to a congregation in the midst of a “spiritual revolution.” Some of its leaders were uniquely gifted, manifesting the ability to speak in “strange tongues” through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This was not a new thing however. In Jerusalem on Pentecost, the Apostles, led by Peter, had been given the gift of tongues by the Holy Spirit so that they could proclaim “the wonders of God” in languages not their own but that were spoken by members of their audience. These tongues were confirmation of their authority to preach and a sign that the gospel would be “preached to all nations” as Jesus had commanded.

In Corinth, some leaders had obtained another sort of ability - referred to as “ecstatic or heavenly speech.” It was not a discernable human language however, as at Pentecost. Consequently people wonder why they hadn’t received this gift and began to think of these leaders as superior. There was conflict in the congregation as a consequence. Conflict, not the spiritual gifts themselves is why Paul wrote. I Corinthians 12-14 are exclusively about “spiritual gifts.” Paul didn’t write against them but to teach the congregation that each gift has its place and function, and none should be regarded as superior.

To illustrate, Paul uses “body language.” The church is like a human he said – each “part” has a unique function. Now we can’t sit here and argue that the brain or heart or lungs are not pretty darn important or equate them with hair color or complexion. But by using “body language” Paul concludes that spiritual gifts are for spiritual health, which in turn is dependent on respect and gratitude among “the parts”. The heart can’t do math, lungs can’t pump blood, and a signal from the brain to sing loud does not necessarily mean that a voice box will sing well! Even “exalted” parts have limits. Or better yet – exalted parts ought to have humility.

The Church in Corinth was awfully gifted in human terms. Successful people – merchants, government officials and scholars would have been on the membership rolls. The Bible nowhere discourages success but it does routinely caution against pride. Yes, Paul says God has priorities for the church – apostles, prophets and teachers served those priorities – they were the gospel proclaimers. But proclaimers need actual people to proclaim the gospel to. Healers and helpers and folks with listening ears and wise tongues who show the compassionate face of that gospel of love win a hearing for that gospel of salvation. At Pentecost, speaking in tongues gave authority to the apostles to preach – it got them noticed you might say. Kindness and mercy and charity among and from Christians would soon also do that.

In our lesson from Luke Jesus talked about the delight with which God would give “good gifts” to his children –adding that the gift giver would be “the Holy Spirit.” ‘*What work does the Holy Spirit do in my life*’ has been our focus of late. The ‘first work’ of the Holy Spirit we said last time is to paste to your heart the promise that God loves you and you have salvation in Jesus Christ through the forgiveness of your sins. That is what it means to be sanctified. That’s a very personal gift from God to you - it makes you a unique “set apart” person.

J. Oswald Sanders calls sanctification the “Gift of the Spirit.” But “gifts of the Spirit” are unique to each person – and are really a gift to the church. They vary in kind and effect but not in purpose. The gifts have one purpose – to win a hearing for the gospel that has filled your heart and mind with Christ Jesus. When you come to faith in Jesus Christ, you become part of

Jesus – “a splendid exchange” as Luther called it takes place. He takes your sin and death and gives you grace and life. You become possessors of what the Bible calls “fruits of the Spirit” – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. God through the Holy Spirit continually produces them within you by your union with Christ.

Gifts of the Spirit differ in that they are given “when and where” the Spirit chooses – they are external in that they are not all given to each – but they are given so that the church may benefit from and depend upon the “good gifts” of each. Preachers preach; teachers teach; singers sing; givers give; and organizers organize. Yes, Paul encourages each Christian to “eagerly desire the greater gifts” – (I Corinthians 12:31) and that can become a matter of prayer for each of us.

But with his very next breath – I Corinthians 13:1 - Paul puts this whole subject of gifts in its proper perspective. There he says, not to a bride and groom by the way but to bride of Christ - the church - *“now I will show you the most excellent way....if I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.”* Spiritual gifts - what can we say about them? They are simply a labor of love – and each of us a pen in the hand of the author of love, Jesus. AMEN

A final thought. Ephesus was the most important Roman city in the region of Asia, so a lot of soldiers rolled through there. Ephesians were used to seeing soldiers on parade in their “full armor.” Wearing your full armor was a statement – *“look at how well equipped we are – don’t mess with us.”* Still, it wasn’t so much a show of force as of the splendor of the ruler those soldiers represented - Rome. Paul would have seen plenty of those parades, so he borrowed that vivid image of soldiers on parade to teach Christians how well equipped they are. *“Put on the full armor of God”* he said. The truth of God’s word never relinquish. The righteousness of Jesus ever pursue. To every one of Satan’s lies say *“I have faith in what Jesus says to me”* and with the word of God answer every one of them. You who wear this armor - you are the glory of God. AMEN