

The Book of 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Session 57: The Best Gifts

In other words, the highest of the gifts was that of an apostle. Paul tells us this in verse 28. The next highest gift was that of a prophet. That was followed by a teacher. These are the gifts which edify the body, so they are considered to be the “best gifts.” Verse 28 is a ranking of the gifts: we covered this previously. So, what does this mean? It means that members of the body of Christ do not possess equal gifts.

The question therefore is this: On what basis did the Spirit give the gifts? The apostle Paul does not explain the basis by which the Spirit gave those gifts, but one of two things is true. Either the Spirit gave the gifts in accordance with certain natural capacities or abilities, or, along with the gift, each person was also equipped with the necessary abilities to discharge their gift. Either way, the fact remains that everyone was not given the same gift, or even gifts of equal importance.

Having said that, let me say that no gift was unimportant as they all worked to accomplish an operation of God. Even though the gifts themselves are not equal, the members to whom they were given are of equal value, as they all play a part and fill a role.

1 Corinthians 12:22 Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary:

Again, this is in the context of the gifts, so the “feebleness” referred to here is not about the individual saint, but refers to the particular gift which was given.

1 Corinthians 12:23 And those *members* of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely *parts* have more abundant comeliness.²⁴ For our comely *parts* have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that *part* which lacked:²⁵ That there should be

no schism in the body; but *that* the members should have the same care one for another.

Why would the Corinthians think some members to be “less honorable?” Because of the particular gift they received. While Paul does say that some gifts are more honorable, he also says that there should be no schism in the body because of that. The care the members have for each other should not be based on the gift they received. They were to have the same care for every member; that is the equitable part of the equation.

Now, let’s look at the last verse in the chapter.

1 Corinthians 12:31 But **covet earnestly** the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.

What does Paul mean when he says to “covet earnestly” the best gifts? It doesn’t mean for them to “hope they get one of the best gifts for themselves.” How do we know this? Because the gifts were not given at their option, plus they were not to emulate the gift of another. To hope to get one of the best gifts is to aspire to superiority, which is contrary to what should be working in their hearts.

Look, this gets a bit tricky; the endowments are produced by the Spirit and He chooses who gets which gift.

1 Corinthians 12:11 But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.

No one should be prideful on account of the gift given to them, nor should one be depressed, sad or discontent because they have a more humble rank of gift. What the Spirit of God is after is for each member to willingly and joyfully occupy the gift which has been given. The earnest desire should be contentment with the station (the gift) which the Spirit has given. That does not mean that it is wrong for a man to regard the higher gifts of the Spirit as valuable.

So, what does it mean to “covet earnestly the best gifts?” There are two major schools of thought, and as you will see, I will disagree with both. I don’t like it when this happens, but I think we have missed the point Paul is trying to make. It

makes me uneasy when I disagree with everyone because it makes me think I might be wrong, but I can only teach what I understand about the verses. You should make your own decision about how you see the verse.

The first school of thought sees the first half of verse 31 as a command. I agree with that part. But what they think Paul is commanding is for them to pray to God for the best gifts; for them to hope they get one of the best gifts. I do not think this is what is meant, as we have already demonstrated this kind of selfish thinking as wrong. What good would it do to tell them to desire to be given the best gifts when they have no input into the process? It is the Spirit that determines who gets which gift and this is not a prayer issue.

The second school of thought does not see verse 31 as any kind of instruction. Instead, they go back to the Greek, and seeing the verb as indicative, they deduce that Paul is not telling them to do something, but he is stating what they are already doing.

Let me quote, “He is literally telling them, “But (you) covet the best gifts...” The subject “you” is understood and therefore does not need to be stated.” The second half of the verse supports this understanding. “And yet I shew unto you a more excellent way” (verse 31b). Paul is saying, “You are seeking the best gifts, but I show you a better way.”

I disagree with all of this understanding. First of all, when they give the gist of the verse, they leave out “earnestly” and only use the word “covet.” Is there a difference? I think the word “earnestly” helps us discover the proper meaning of “covet.”

Earnestly: in earnest manner, with great seriousness, sincerity or intensity.

Let me ask you a question; do you get the idea that the Corinthians are sincerely desiring the best gifts, or, are they elevating the lesser gifts and ignoring the more important gifts? Paul didn’t tell them the ranking of the gifts because they already knew it, he told them because they needed correction. And this is the “correction” part of the doctrine.

To earnestly covet would indicate that the coveting is not so much about desiring to have the gift, but desiring what the best gifts produce; edification. In other words, Paul is telling them that while these gifts are in operation, earnestly (sincerely and seriously) covet (desire) for the best gifts to edify you. What would be the alternative to that? It would be to elevate the lesser gifts and ignore the best gifts.

Think about it. What were the best gifts given for? The edification of the saints. Then why wouldn't Paul tell them to earnestly covet those gifts? To what end? To the edification of their souls.

Normally, when we see the word covet, we think of something that is wrong; "to desire that which belongs to another." Is it possible that this was going on in the Corinthians assembly? I think it absolutely was going on. I think the Corinthians were petty and jealous; immature and divisive, but even though that is happening, I don't think that is what Paul is talking about here.

In a nutshell, to earnestly covet the best gifts means to strongly desire to be ministered to by those best gifts. It means to recognize their value as edification gifts and highly prize them as the best gifts. And why are these the best gifts? Because the edification gifts are the ones which conform us to the image of God's Son. That conformity is the "prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." There is no higher calling.

Now let's look at the second half of the verse, which I also see differently from most.

1 Corinthians 12:31 But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.

Paul says that he will shew unto them a more excellent way; but a more excellent way to do what? The answer to that question depends on which subject we think Paul is addressing. If he is talking about a more excellent way to exercise the gifts, then the answer is "charity" or love.

But that word “yet” I think prevents this understanding. What does the word “yet” add to our understanding? Let’s look at several related definitions, which are variations of the second meaning of the word, “yet.”

Oxford English Dictionary (OED): II.5.b. Yet - With negative participles and adjectives formed with *in-*, *un-*, etc., implying that the action or state implied by the corresponding positive term has still to happen.

Using this definition, the more excellent way is that which has still to happen.

II.5.c. Old English—With following infinitive referring to something which has so far not happened but might be expected to happen in the future.

Using this definition, why would a better way to exercise the gifts not be expected until in the future?

II.7.d. c1400—With *ere*, *before*, etc., indicating the ultimate occurrence of something after an interval of time.

Again, why would there need to be an interval of time unless the more excellent way is not about the spiritual gifts, which are at that time, present, but instead refers to a replacement for the gifts which would be “after an interval of time?” And this fits the history precisely. Paul is writing this around 54 A.D. If the more excellent way is the written revelation of scripture, then an interval of time is precisely what is needed.

Paul is saved around 31 A.D. His first book, Galatians is written around 48 A.D. That means that the spiritual gifts are in operation for more than 15 years before Paul’s first written epistle. But the gifts don’t cease with the first book written, but gradually fade away as more and more of the scriptures are written. By the time Paul writes his last book, 2 Timothy, the spiritual gifts are now completely gone. When does Paul write 2 Timothy? Somewhere around 66-67 A.D. That means that the gifts operated, to some degree, for about 30 years or so. That 30 years would be the “interval of time” before the more excellent way made its full appearance.

II.8. With a negative, referring to something which has so far not happened but with the implication that subsequent change is expected or a recognized possibility: **not as things stand at this point in time** (or as they stood at the time in question), still not, not so far, not hitherto.

If the more excellent way was to integrate love into the operation of the gifts, why could it not be done “at this point in time?” In fact, that is Paul’s whole purpose, to say that they should exercise the gifts in charity. Therefore, the more excellent way is not about a better way to exercise the gifts, but an alternative to the gifts.

II.9. With reference to future time.

II.9.a. Old English— At some time **in the future**

So, here is my question: Was “love” something that so far had not happened but was going to happen at some point in future? In other words, when Paul says he will “yet shew unto them a more excellent way,” is he talking about discharging their gifts with charity (love) as something reserved for the future? Or is love something that should already be generated in them right now? If you say they should have godly love as they exercise their spiritual gifts, then why use the word “yet?”

Look, I can make a case that exercising the gifts with charity is a more excellent way than the gifts without charity, but that still doesn’t explain the word “yet.”

The way I understand it is by answering the original question differently. Remember the question? Paul will yet (in the future) shew unto them a more excellent way of what? A more excellent way of being edified.

A more excellent way from what? From the best gifts.

1 Corinthians 12:31 But covet earnestly **the best gifts**: and yet shew I unto you a **more excellent way**.

Paul will show them a more excellent way than by the best gifts, the edification gifts.

In other words, Paul is telling them that he will show them a better way to be edified in the future, once the spiritual gifts have been done away with, because

edification isn't going to stop. So, what will God eventually begin to use to edify the saints? The written word of God.

We could make a more general application by saying that Paul is going to show them a more excellent way of accomplishing all of the operations of God by the written word than by the spiritual gifts, but because Paul mentions the edification gifts in verse 31, then I think this especially applies to the edification process.

Think of verse 31 as saying this: for now, I am recommending the best gifts which edify you, but I am about to show you a better (more excellent) way to be edified in the future.

Just about everyone thinks the more excellent way is "love." And they think this partly because that is what the next chapter is all about; love.

But I don't see it that way. If that is the case, then love is the alternative way to the spiritual gifts, and it isn't. The spiritual gifts are supposed to be exercised in godly love and charity, and that is exactly what chapter 13 begins to emphasize.

The more excellent way has to do with what the "best gifts" were doing; edification.

When Paul says to covet earnestly the best gifts, which were "best" because they were edification gifts, then when he says that he will yet show unto them a more excellent way of being edified, does he do that? Does Paul show them a better way to be edified than by the spiritual gifts? He does, in the very next chapter; chapter 13.

Major Points from the Lesson

Seven purposes to Value and Esteem the body of Christ: Ephesians 4:3-6 (verses 4-6)

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| 1. One body | 4. One Lord |
| 2. One Spirit | 5. One faith |
| 3. One hope | 6. One baptism |
| 7. One God and Father of all. | |