

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, may Your wisdom be my guide as I think about what I do today, may Your Light be my guide as I seek to discern the truth, and may Your love be my guide as I spend time with those I love. In this way, may I learn to value Your presence within the detail of every moment I live; all praise to You Lord Jesus Christ: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

1. For yourself

Pray about what is on your mind today. Do not be shy to bring the things that are of concern to you before the throne of God's grace

2. For your friends and family

Pray for the needs of those you love. Put yourself in their position, insofar as you can, and pray that their needs are met by God's grace

3. For the church and its work

Pray for the current needs of your church, perhaps in finance or in vision, or in leadership ...

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for the needs of your community and nation. Pray that God's will be done

Meditation

Let us truly honour God, and respect each other:

Let us give thanks for the privilege of salvation;

Let us offer Him our whole lives, without question;

Let us take every opportunity to speak about Jesus;

Let us love everyone we meet, unquestionably;

Let us do all we can for the poor as Christ would do;

Let us put aside time, each day, to study God's Word;

Let us take every opportunity to pray to our Lord;

Let us support the church, in good times and ill;

Let us donate our time and wealth for God's work;

Let us show love for others, in every possible way;

Let us truly honour God, and respect each other; always.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 12: 27-31

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and you are its individual parts, ²⁸ and in the church, God has appointed first apostles, second prophets and third teachers, and after this miracles, gifts of healing, helpful deeds, leadership, types of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But you strive for the greater gifts! Now, I will point out to you something far more important.

Review

This notable passage concludes 1 Corinthians 12. Here, Paul urges the Christians at Corinth to be united both in themselves as the church at Corinth, and also as part of the whole church of God in the world with its many apostles, leaders and teachers. In addition, he gives a further list of spiritual gifts, which add to those found earlier in the chapter (12:10f.) and he encourages his readers to seek spiritual gifts and use them for the good of the whole church.

To a certain extent, this passage appears at first to summarise all that has been said in this chapter about spiritual gifts (12:28f.), and about the church as a 'body' with 'parts' (12:27). But everything we have read here is rather different to what has gone before. The list of spiritual gifts given here is significantly different from that found earlier, and verse 31 also suggests that there is a hierarchy of spiritual gifts to which Christians should aspire. It certainly sounds as if Paul is saying more about this subject even if it is not immediately apparent. As well as closing this chapter of 1 Corinthians, its last sentence leads us into what comes next, which is Paul's famous speech about the qualities of 'love', found in 1 Corinthians 13.

The first verse of our passage (12:27) emphasises Paul's teaching that the church is the 'Body of Christ' made up of individuals. Now we might think that Paul was speaking about the church at Corinth as one church, but it is soon clear that he was speaking about more than this. By referring to apostles, prophets and teachers, Paul includes the wider church within this great picture of God's work in the world, and as Scripture, this passage applies to all of us who read it. Moreover, it is here, after making this point clear, that Paul finally uses the full expression '*the Body of Christ*' which although we have not realised it, has not been used in 1 Corinthians 12 up to this point! In truth, Paul has painted this picture so well that we already have this phrase on our lips before he writes it down!

As Paul continues and speaks of the different spiritual gifts within the church, he gives us two lists, one in verse 28 and another similar one in verse 29. So there is indeed not just one list of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12, there are three lists, and all of them must be compared! Now, the earlier list (12:8-10) offers no sense of priority, and Paul is at pains to describe each of the gifts as given by the Holy Spirit (12:4) for the purposes of Christ's work in the world (12:5). Now, however, Paul adds three important gifts not mentioned earlier, but which have a priority, '*first apostles, second prophets and third teachers ...*' (12:8). It is generally reckoned that these gifts are the so-called 'ministry' gifts given for the leadership of the church, and their order, found also in Ephesians (Eph 4:11), reflects God's intention for order within the church. Furthermore, we should not be shy of speaking about 'order' within the church because we will find that Paul returns to this theme strongly in 1 Corinthians 14.

The remaining list of gifts in verse 28 reads like a shortened form of the list of spiritual gifts given earlier, but it is more complicated than that. The gifts of 'healing', 'miracles' and 'tongues' are found both in this verse and earlier but Paul adds to this the gifts of leadership and 'helpful deeds'. In this, it seems that Paul is now turning his gaze on practical church life and good order amongst its people, where earlier, he was concerned more about spiritual character in general.

Throughout, Paul presses home his point about the diversity of the church and the use of its different gifts to the benefit of all. In verse 29, he asks whether anyone possesses all the great spiritual gifts mentioned, and in so doing, almost repeats the same list of gifts found in verse 28! This last small 'list' is again a summary, but interestingly, Paul includes the gift of 'interpretation of tongues' as well as the gift of tongues. It is an indicator of Paul's mind, for he soon returns to speak at length about both the gift of tongues and the interpretation of tongues (chapter 14)!

Right at the end of the passage, Paul says this, '*But you strive for the greater gifts! Now I will point out to you something that is far more important!*' (12:31), and it is rather uncertain what he means by this. The details of this translation are complex, and found in the 'going deeper' part of this study, but in summary, Paul says here that he does not want God's people to pursue spiritual gifts as the people at Corinth were beginning to do. They are all God's gifts, whatever value they have on earth.

But lastly, Paul turns away from this discussion of the Body of Christ and spiritual gifts, saying that he has something far more important to say (12:31). Of course, we know what is coming next, which is the famous chapter 1 Corinthians 13. We will find tomorrow that 'love' is the one spiritual gift not mentioned here in 1 Corinthians 12 which is perhaps more important than anything else in the world.

Going Deeper

- Notes of the translation of the passage
- The order of the gifts (12:28f.)
- The new 'gifts' (12:28)
 - Apostleship
 - Teaching
 - Helpful deeds

- Leadership
- Verse 31 – referring back to verse 28?

Notes on the translation of the passage

V27 ‘... and you are its individual parts’

The Greek says this ‘... and parts individually’. In order to understand this in English, we have to repeat the words ‘you are’ found in the first half of the sentence.

V28 ‘helpers’

The Greek word ‘antilempsis’ means literally, the opposite of someone who receives, in other words, one who does things that help; in other words, ‘helpful deeds’.

V28 ‘leadership’

The Greek word ‘kuberneseis’ In the singular, this means ‘administration, but in the plural, it means ‘leadership. Why the Greeks should connect the two in this way is interesting (see study).

V28 ‘types of tongues’

Again, as earlier in 1 Cor 12:10, the word is not ‘speaking in tongues’, and the expression is slightly different from 12:10, emphasising different kinds of ‘tongues’. It certainly seems that Paul was aware that ‘tongues’ was not one gift, but something like a variety of different manifestations of speaking, so classified because what was heard was not intelligible.

V30 ‘interpret’

The word used here is not quite the same as that used in verse 10, but is related. The Greek word ‘diemeneu’ousin’ suggests explanation and translation as well as ‘interpretation’, and these words help us understand the range of meaning we can apply to this somewhat mysterious gift.

V31 ‘So strive for the greater gifts ...’

The translation of this is contentious (see study). I have translated it in this way because the Greek verb ‘zeloute’ is normally translated here as an imperative, as if Paul was giving a command ‘strive for ...’. However, there is no reason for this to be the case, because this word is the same as the normal 2nd person plural ‘you strive ...’ as if by way of comment. In addition, the sentence begins with a small word ‘de’ which is puzzling and hard to translate. For an explanation of what this all means, see study.

To look at this passage closely, there is little point in trying to say more about what Paul means by the body and its parts; this is now obvious. However, it is worth exploring why Paul gives an order of gifts like this, and trying to understand the other ‘gifts’ mentioned here. Lastly, we must look very closely at verse 31 and I will set out the rather complex arguments for why I suggest a different translation here than most others.

The order of the gifts (12:28f.)

The order of the gifts mentioned here in verse 28, and echoed in verses 29 and 30 are interesting. In order to understand what Paul is saying, it is best to look at Ephesians 4:11-13:

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

Some suggest that this list of Paul’s is radically different in nature from what is found in 1 Corinthians 12, and the common comment made by people is that in Corinthians we find the general spiritual gifts, but in Ephesians we find the ‘ministry gifts’. It is notable however, that Paul’s list here is very similar to that in the beginning of our passage. The only difference is that in Ephesians, Paul places the gift of evangelism in between prophets and teachers, but in 1 Corinthians 12:28, evangelism is missing.

I do not believe, however, that what Paul was talking about here in Ephesians was radically different than in 1 Corinthians. In both of these great texts, Paul mentions the ‘body of Christ’ and its unity. Indeed, Ephesians speaks about building up the body to its full stature, which is an entirely expected comment, and would have fitted as well in the Corinthians passage. We must accept that both letters were written at different times to different people, but the basic structure of Paul’s comments in both texts is very similar. For this reason, I do not believe it is worth separating these lists from each other as if they were different. Paul was as much interested in building up the Corinthian church with his writing here in 1 Corinthians as he was when writing to the Ephesians. I even suggest if Paul did have a list in his head of ‘apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers’, that the omission of ‘evangelists’ may have been appropriate in addressing the

Corinthians; of all the churches he wrote to, this was the one with the most endemic problems. It may have been unwise for Paul to say much about evangelism to a church that needed so much advice from him about returning itself to its basic principles of faith! I am not sure Paul would have been happy for a new convert to learn from what was happening at that church!

The order reflects the priority Paul gave the apostles, in his day, properly understood as those who had a direct personal relationship with Christ, that is, the twelve disciples (including Matthias who replaced Judas). Later, of course, Paul testified to a personal vision of Christ that qualified him as an apostle to the Gentiles, as he claims at the beginning of most of his letters. To be an apostle was a gift, the highest of the gifts, but it was not a gift to which anyone could aspire (hence my interpretation of verse 31). Prophets came next, because prophets were the primary witnesses to the work of God amongst His people going back into the Old Testament. Thirdly, I suggest that Paul placed evangelists and then teachers because these gifts directly fulfilled the commission of Christ to 'go into all the world ...' (Matt 28:19). It is not that we can separate these gifts out as if they were all radically different; for example, the apostles were evangelists, but not all evangelists were apostles. Some were teachers, and there is good evidence (Acts 18:24f.) that Apollos was a good evangelist and teacher, for example. Nevertheless, the argument does, I believe, break down after this. This is why Paul continued to give a list of gifts with no priority order.

The new 'gifts' (12:28)

In addition to the gifts already mentioned, and discussed at length in our study of 1 Cor. 12:7-11, Paul mentions here apostles, teachers, helpful deeds, and leadership. The words used to describe 'tongues', and indeed in verse 30, 'interpretation' are slightly different from those found in 12:10, but the variation seems appropriate. Paul clearly observed that the gift of tongues was not one thing but many, and in this passage (12:28), the word he uses (translated 'types') could also mean 'families' of tongues. This conjures up a picture in our minds of people using all kinds of gifts of tongues in the days of the early church; singing, praying, prophesying, using actual foreign languages and unknown ones, and much more. Books which treat the phenomenon as virtually one phenomenon (and you can find these in most bookshops) do not do justice to the scriptural record or to the reality either of today or the past.

Apostleship Moving on, I will say only a little about the gift of apostleship because I have explained above what Paul would have understood by this term. Paul's own inclusion in the list of apostles leaves open the possibility, however, that Christ can appear to people today in special ways, and anoint them for a special apostolic role. In my opinion, the characteristics of this anointing are a close and distinct experience of the risen Lord, a heart for God's Word and the historic faith, and a call for the special building up of the church which is groundbreaking. I would add that it would be unwise for any of us to either claim this for ourselves or suggest it of too many. This is something special; for example, I would suggest that Billy Graham has been an apostle with a special task of demonstrating to the church an appropriate model for evangelism, by doing it successfully in his day. In my opinion this model remains valid, but it is certainly not the only model.

Teaching This is clearly a gift of the spirit, and this is attested in Ephesians 4:11 and Romans 12:7. It is also very similar to the gifts mentioned earlier of 'words of wisdom' and 'words of knowledge' (12:8). Certainly, one who is gifted with the ability to teach the things of God is one who will search out the 'wisdom' literature of the Old Testament. I also suggest that a teacher of the things of God is someone who knows God's Word because they read it all the time. We too often confer on people the label of 'teacher' because they have come to know certain things and can speak well. This is utterly different from that true knowledge of God that comes from being immersed in His Word, and therefore, being able to speak about it with Godly authority.

Helpful deeds This gift is not often expounded or explained. It is however a profoundly important gift. As you can see from the notes above, this gift is the opposite (literally, in the Greek) to the activity of receiving. We all know those people who will receive everything on offer, and we all know those who are always ready to give; the second are what we are talking about! Those who are constantly available to 'help' are a great blessing in any church community, and clearly, it is a general gift, but it comes from the heart. This is a gift to which anyone may aspire, but it seems that few are really 'gifted'. The Lord puts His hand on some, because their life's circumstances means that they can offer to help when others cannot, and this is vital for the life of God's people.

Leadership Astonishingly, if we were left to ourselves to place a gift at the top of the tree today, we might place 'leadership'! Certainly, of young people who come to Bible College, the most driven are those who feel they have a call to work towards some kind of church leadership, either in ordained ministry or youth leadership, for example. Notice that Paul gives this no priority, and despite the importance of good leaders, we should perhaps note that it is not mentioned together with the apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers! The Bible has a great deal to say about leadership, but our modern assumption that it is the same as being a preacher and a prophet, for example, are

sadly wrong. The Greek word used here is interesting. In the notes above, you will see that the singular of the word means 'administration', and the plural means 'leader'. Perhaps the etymology of the word suggests to us that in an earthy sense, one who is a good leader is one who knows how to administrate!

Verse 31 – referring back to verse 28?

I have already explained the general reasons for why I have translated this verse as I have, and the translation notes add to the background for what I about to say.

A careful look at the Greek original of our passage suggests that Paul sets up a comparison by using a small conjunction (a connecting word) in verse 28, translated 'on the one hand ...'. Now the passage flows on typically of Paul, but there does not seem to be any evidence of the second part of this contrast, like 'on the other hand ...'. In fact, another conjunction appears in verse 31, (the Greek word 'de') which can sometimes be used as a connecting link for this expression found in verse 28. This is my first argument for suggesting that the current versions found in most Bibles is incorrect. The second technical argument is this. Most Bibles translate the first phrase in verse 28 as a command ('strive for the higher gifts') because that is how it has always been translated, and this is how the same word is used in other places in the Bible. However, any good lexicon of the New Testament Greek will tell you that this same word can be a normal statement 'you strive for ...'. If we accept that this is the case here, it can only be a sarcastic or disapproving comment!

Now, put these two pieces of evidence together and what we have is this. In verse 28, Paul began; 'On the one hand ...', and explained his own understanding of the spiritual gifts (by way of summary) and that although they had order, they were all equally valuable. Now in verse 31, using the Greek 'de', Paul gave us the contrast, which was the attitude of the Corinthians of which he disapproved! Their attitude was that people should have a go at the gifts and see whether they could get the higher ones from God! How dreadful and scandalous! This was exactly what Paul was fighting against!

There is no wonder then that despite the amazing and powerful nature of chapter 12, Paul was leading up to something very special, his explanation of the one thing that stood above all else, and still stands above all things because it is the very character of God shown in Christ Jesus. We know that Paul was talking about love, and this is the subject of chapter 13, coming next.

Discipleship

Application

There is not a great deal I can say about application here, because most of this passage is pure summary, and it reiterates what Paul has said throughout the chapter about spiritual gifts and the body of Christ. Paul certainly brings out very well that there is order within the structure of the body, and we can expect to find this within the body. Some people today do not like the idea that the church has 'structure' or 'order', but as we will find out in chapter 14, Paul speaks about this as a matter of considerable importance. It is a reminder to us that a chip on the shoulder about anything from church unity to 'the Pope' or 'speaking in tongues' will not help God's people one little bit. Every topic is serious, but we are foolish if we allow the devil to entrench our differences because of our personal attitudes and feelings. However 'right' we believe ourselves to be about anything, we need to be humble in the face of God's greater knowledge and the experience and faith of all God's people; not just those we know.

The main thing I would ask you to consider today is that the scholar who attempts to dig into the text of the Bible is not the enemy of the Word of God. Sometimes, people wave away anyone who talks about such things as I have described here in 12:31 with a quick word 'oh I don't understand this'. Not one of us can afford to ignore such things. If I am right, then I pray that my work here has helped you to gain a decent understanding of a verse of scripture that most people read and say 'oh I don't understand that', and quickly discover that if they read other books about it, few other people do either! I have spent a fair amount of time checking over what I have presented to you, and I know several things. Firstly, though very confident I have not made a mistake, I would be happy for anyone to correct me if I am wrong. Secondly, how much better to know that what Paul says is consistent instead of being an illogical puzzle; why should we be content not being sure what God's Word says here? Thirdly, you may not understand all the grammatical issues involved, but I have tried to explain them. I nearly failed my equivalent of GCSE English when 16, and for most of my life have known only elementary grammar. In order to understand the Word of God, I learned grammar whilst studying Hebrew and Greek, and have attempted to use this to help others understand the Biblical text. There is no reason why most people cannot understand these things when they are explained, and it is surely worth the effort if it enables us to understand God's Word better, especially at those places where many people are genuinely confused about what the Bible says.

Questions for groups

1. Which gifts of the spirit in this list are of special interest to you, and why? Share your response to this in your group.
2. Do you understand the grammatical arguments within this study about verse 31? Discuss this with others if you do not.
3. How do people evaluate the gifts of the spirit today, and do they give them any kind of priority? Why do some people do this?

Discipleship challenges

- *Take some time to reflect on the new 'gifts of the spirit' mentioned in this passage. Are any of them gifts that you have received, or are any of them gifts that you have questions about and need to explore?*
- *Pray for all God's people, that they may be willing to do as much as they can to find out the meaning of the Bible and understand what they read. Take the time to read the 'introduction' written in the front of your Bible before 'Genesis'. You may not know that there is one there, but there is, and it will explain the approach that scholars have taken in writing the translation you read. It is interesting.*

Final Prayer

Lord God, keep us close within our families, close to each other and close to You. Save us from the dangers of this world that seek to draw people apart, and grant us the grace to be loving in all our actions and words to each other. We pray this through Jesus Christ our Saviour: AMEN
