

Sermon Series: The Weak, Foolish, and Victorious Gospel
**Sermon Text and Title: 1 Corinthians 14:13-25 - The Loving Goal of Gathering: Gospel-Help that
Glorifies God (Part 2)**

Sermon Points:

Introduction: Living on the Edge of Eternity

Christians Gather to...

1. Speak Intelligibly for Instruction (vv.13-19)

2. Speak with Clarity for Conviction (vv.20-25)

Application: Worship Services on the Edge of Eternity

Prayer Points:

1. Pray that we would long to help build each other and see the lost come to know Jesus.

2. Pray that we would long to speak the truth of the gospel in ways that instruct, comfort, and convict to the worship of God.

3. Pray that our gatherings would cause people to treasure Jesus more and cause the things of this world to grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace as we live on the edge of eternity.

Introduction: Living on the Edge of Eternity

As I was preparing to preach this message on Friday afternoon I suddenly had this odd thought. "Why is Paul so unbelievably serious about these Corinthians getting these things right?" Maybe that sounds odd to you, but when you spend lots of time in a text that is highly debated and might get people mad at you on either side, you start asking these things.

Now, what I think the Bible says is the ultimate answer is God's glory. Paul wants the Corinthians to honor God in all they do. He wants them to live this life in a way that shows the world their hope is not in this life but in eternity with God through the gospel of Jesus who died for their sins. He wants them to be a people that show that Jesus is the most worthy object in the universe by being a people that find their deepest, truest joy in all that Jesus provides for them in the gospel above all the things the world might provide them.

And what makes this all the more urgent is that this life is terribly short.

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. (James 4:13-14)

Christians that gather together gather as a people whose life is a vapor meant to make much of Jesus. Christians gather together with life as a vapor and suffering and sin clinging closely. Christians gather together as people that the world often sees as foolish and weak, who need to be reminded that because of the blood of Jesus alone for the forgiveness of their sins no eye has seen or ear has heard what God has prepared for those who love him in the day they see him face to face.

And any unbelievers that might walk into one of our worship services, and I hope you invite them, need to hear clearly that sin is serious, Jesus saves, and there is eternity to enjoy the glory of God if they will just repent from their sin and believe.

And so, Paul speaks with urgency. Paul speaks with care. Paul wants to see people live for the glory of God. And Paul knows no matter who comes together to worship they come broken and in need of real help from the Spirit of God in order to treasure, worship, and obey Jesus in their day to day life or perhaps even for the very first time.

You can hear this ache coming through in Paul's heart for this church in every single issue addressed in 1 Corinthians. He doesn't just want them to get their theology right or get their behavior right, although he does help them with those things. He wants them to trust Jesus more deeply. He wants them to embrace being radically different from the world more fully. He wants to see the gospel embraced and lived out more seriously among them. And he wants all of this because he deeply cares for the ultimate joy of people and the ultimate glory of God.

So, as we approach these verses where Paul is telling us his preference for prophecy over tongues in worship, hear the heart behind Paul's message and join him in it.

Christians Gather to...

Speak Intelligibly for Instruction (vv.13-19)

Before we dive into verses 13-19 let's remember what Paul is doing in this chapter. Paul says in 14:1 that he expects the blood-bought family at Corinth to use the spiritual gifts in the way of love that he commended to them in chapter 13. And therefore, when the church gathers the priority should be not on individual preferences or individual ideas, but on love for others that is Christ-like because the Spirit of Christ lives inside of them.

And as we continue in this chapter we should also keep in mind that Paul says the role of the Spirit of God is always to make people say, "Jesus is Lord" (12:3) and therefore that's what these gifts are meant to do as well-- help people worship Jesus.

And remember we said that in this chapter Paul is comparing the how the gifts of prophecy and tongues should be prioritized in worship. So, very quickly, let's remind ourselves of the definitions of those gifts:

Tongues: Speaking divinely-given content unknown to the speaker for the sake of personal help and/or to help others when understood for God's glory.

Prophecy: Speaking forth a previously unknown reality or application divinely revealed to help others for God's glory.

So, what did Paul say in verses 1-12? Paul said that prophecy is always aimed to help others worship and obey Jesus while tongues is often between just an individual and God. So, basically, Paul said that when it comes to the gathering of believers he prefers prophecy over tongues (vv.1-5) because unless tongues is interpreted no one can understand what the speaker is saying (vv.6-11). But, when someone prophesies people can understand it and therefore be encouraged, comforted, and built up. Verse 12 sums up Paul's overall point well:

So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

Paul says that the way of love means the Corinthians should strive for those manifestations of the Spirit that will build up others in their presence. And that's where Paul continues in verses 13-19. Look at verses 13-14 first that continue this idea:

Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.

Here Paul gives a simple exhortation to the Corinthians based on what he's already said in verse 12. If I want to build up the church because I'm motivated by Christ-like love, then I should pray for an interpretation of

any tongue that I get. Because if I only pray in tongues, I am built up and my inner spirit is encouraged, but I don't know the message and therefore can't help anyone else.

Paul is clear in his encouragements to the Corinthians to make their church gatherings a time of help for everyone involved. Paul has commanded them to pray for an interpretation that can help others because that's what Christ-like love demands. Look at verse 15 now:

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.

So, what should be done? Pray both within their spirit and with their mind so that it can help others. They should sing with their mind and their spirit engaged. Now, this could mean at least two things. It could mean they pray for interpretation and the Lord gives it and therefore they pray and sing with a tongue and then share that interpretation with others for their benefit. Or, it could simply mean that they pray prayers and sing songs that involve both mind and spirit out loud for the benefit of others.

Either way, verses 16-17 make it clear that Paul wants the things spoken in the worship service to help everyone there to worship Jesus:

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? For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not being built up.

Paul says that if you only speak in words people can't understand, you might be doing a great job giving thanks to God for all of the glories of the gospel and for all of his promises and for all of his character, but know one else can agree with you. No one else can say "Amen." And therefore, no one in the position of an "outsider", that is someone who isn't familiar with the practice can be encouraged to further worship or obedience to Jesus because they don't understand.

Paul gives a strong concluding statement in verses 18-19 about building up the church:

I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Paul's argument for not speaking in tongues in church might seem to be weaker if he himself didn't have this particular gift.

But, here, on the contrary, Paul says he speaks in tongues more than anyone else. In fact, he's grateful for this gift of the Spirit that allows him to pray and sing mysteries to God that encourage his heart, build up his faith, and probably help him to go forth strengthened for his mission as an apostle.

And yet, even though he's grateful for this gift, Paul says in church he would rather speak five words with his mind so that others can be instructed, rather than 10,000 words in a tongue.

Paul knows that when believers in Christ gather to worship, they are gathering as people living on the edge of eternity. They are gathering with lives filled with remaining sin and lives filled with suffering. They are gathering as people who are seen as foolish and weak to the world. They are gathering as people saturated in a culture that thinks the gospel is foolish. They are gathering as a people needing to be reminded that the cross that looks foolish and weak is really the wisdom and power of God unto salvation and that through that cross they have been given the Spirit to live lives that show the beauty of the gospel. They are gathering desperate for help from God. They are gathering with a need to hear from God himself through his word and by his Spirit.

And so, while Paul valued speaking in tongues in private, he valued words people could understand far more in worship.

We see in verse 19 that Paul sees worship as a time for believers to be instructed; that is to be taught. He wants them to gain deeper understanding about God that will lead to deep comfort, encouragement, and upbuilding in their hearts. He wants them to say “Amen” to the beautiful depths of the character of God and the gospel of Christ. He wants them to be strengthened for suffering. He wants them to be convicted of sin. He wants them to be compelled to see Christ as their greatest treasure. He wants them to be reminded of the promises of God in Christ. He wants them to be built up so that they can persevere. He wants them to be encouraged that even though this world is passing away, they will soon be with Jesus.

And so, Paul, still with love on his mind, says that the way to love one another is to speak five words that help everyone that comes rather than 10,000 words that only help the person speaking. In other words, Paul values intelligible words that for the sake of instruction when it comes to believers gathering to worship.

Speak with Clarity for Conviction (vv.20-25)

In verses 13-19 Paul had his focus on the way worship services should be carried out for the sake of fellow believers that gather. In verses 20-25 he gives further reasoning for speaking with clarity because of the way it might impact unbelievers that come to a worship gathering. Look at verse 20 first:

Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.

Paul is calling the Corinthians to be babies when it comes to evil but to maturity in their thinking. In the very next verse Paul is going to quote from Isaiah 28:11-12, and right before that in Isaiah 28-9-10 Israel’s wicked leaders think that the words of the prophet Isaiah are only for little children, so they ignore him and end up in trouble with God. I think Paul is making a similar point to the Corinthians. In the New Testament, the authoritative role as God’s representative was no longer the prophet, like Isaiah, but the apostle, like Paul.

Paul is telling them that he is standing in the place of authority to help them honor God and that they should heed his words. The Corinthians seemed to measure their spirituality based on the ability to speak in tongues and so they might have been tempted to tell Paul his advice was just for baby Christians who weren’t as gifted as they were, but Paul is warning them that if they want to be mature in their thinking, glorify God, and help others, they must listen to what he has to say! Look at verses 21-22:

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

This quote comes from Isaiah 28:11-12. In Isaiah 28 the people of Israel are unbelieving and disobedient. Isaiah says God will bring a nation with “strange tongues” that they can’t understand to defeat them, but they still won’t turn to God. In other words, when strange tongues were spoken to unbelievers in the history of Israel, it didn’t bring salvation, but further alienation from God. It didn’t draw them to worship of the true God.

Now, the word for “sign” that Paul uses comes largely from the Old Testament and it was simply a word used to describe God’s disposition towards something. A “sign” could be positive or negative.

And so in verse 22, because of the history of Israel and strange tongues further alienating unbelievers, Paul says that strange tongues are not a sign leading to a people becoming believers, but they are a sign of alienation from God for unbelievers. On the other hand though, prophecy is a sign of God’s presence and power among believers. I think Paul is contrasting a negative sign with a positive sign here just as he has contrasted tongues to prophecy throughout the whole chapter.

In other words, the way these gifts impact unbelievers should matter to believers. Believers living on the edge of eternity should long to see unbelievers come to faith in Jesus Christ and worship the true God! And believers should long to see God work among them to show his power and presence in this very way. Look at verse 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?

Paul's point here is pretty clear. If an unbeliever or even someone who is a believer but not familiar with these spiritual gifts comes into church and everyone is speaking in tongues that they can't understand, what will they think? They will think everyone is literally, "raving mad." In other words, this spiritual gift meant to build you up and encourage your heart is good but when used in the wrong way can actually further alienate people from God, just as the analogy of Israel who was further alienated from God by a people speaking a strange tongue. Now look at the contrast in verses 24-25:

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, 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.

Paul is actually drawing from later in the book of Isaiah here, from Isaiah 45:14. There, God is talking to believing Israel and he says people will come to worship God with them because his favor is with them. Therefore, unbelievers who are convicted of sin and therefore turn and worship the true, living God is a sign that God is with his people.

Because people can understand the words spoken when someone prophesies, when an unbeliever or someone unfamiliar with these gifts enters, they can still benefit. In fact, when gospel truth is clearly communicated this way, miracles can happen! Notice what happens. The person is convicted. Every other place this word is used in the New Testament this has to do with the exposing of sin. And the words "called to account" have the idea of being thoroughly examined.

So, when there is clarity in speech given by the Spirit of God, it brings about a convicting examination for the people that hear it. Paul summarizes that in the next sentence when he says, "the secrets of the heart are disclosed."

In other words because words are said that are clear and understandable, an unbeliever or person unfamiliar (along with the believers there) can have the depths of their sinful hearts exposed, they can see God for who he really is, they can see their need for a Savior, they can repent, and they can worship. That's what it says happens, "falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you." Do you see that?

One gift will turn out to be a negative sign that causes a further alienation from God while the other gift will turn out to be a positive sign because as unbelievers and outsiders are brought to repentance and worship through the secrets of their hearts being made known, it is seen that God's very presence is among his people.

And as a people gathering to worship living on the edge of eternity, the longing of every follower of Christ should be that every unbeliever that might enter be met with clear words from God through the blood-bought people of God so that God might work to convict them and save them and make them worshippers of the true, living God.

And so Paul's goal in these verses is to provide further evidence and motivation for the Corinthians to be mature in how they think about their worship gatherings. Paul's goal is to continue to press them to think in the way of love for others about their worship gatherings.

Application: Worship Services on the Edge Eternity

So, as people living on the edge of eternity and with the two points Paul made in the text today, what should worship services be like?

If last week a couple of the main takeaways were to expect that God will actually be among us and help us and to come with the mindset of serving others and being served by others, perhaps this week the main

takeaway from these verses would be to come with the mindset of having your head and your heart engaged in worship.

There are lots of places that lean very strongly one way or another. Heavy on head with little heart. Or heavy on heart with little head. And here, Paul would say that the two are not only both acceptable but vital and connected.

Paul makes a case in these verses for clear, understandable speaking. Paul makes a case that worship services on the edge of eternity should be filled with instruction, with teaching.

Tongues only builds up the person speaking it. Prophecy is a gift that speaks words that everyone can understand, be built up by, be comforted by, be encouraged by, be convicted by, have their sin exposed by, and then be helped to worship Jesus by. Therefore, the reason we want clear words of instruction is so that as people living on the edge of eternity we can have truth fill our heads that then strengthens our hearts.

So, as we come to sing, pray, and hear the word together we should expect that God will be speaking clear words of instruction to our minds that should cause deep feelings of affection in our hearts.

We want sturdy truth that steadies souls that are struggling in their faith. We want penetrating truth that cuts through blindness and hard hearts for those caught in sin. We want comforting truth that is a sweet balm to the heart that is suffering.

And as we come, we should expect to hear that truth from others and share that truth with others. We should come as people who have been saturated with the word of God and have been on our knees in prayer to God during the week so that we can be helpful to others in these ways on Sundays.

In other words, worship is not a spectator sport. We all benefit from one another on Sundays when we go hard after God during the week. We all benefit from each other when we have our minds engaged as we sing, pray, and hear the word together. And we all benefit from a worship service where God speaks clearly to his people and our hearts can be strengthened through other people who are helped by the Spirit.

So, because of the blood of Jesus come to worship expecting to hear clear words of instruction for your mind that lead to deep comfort and conviction for your heart that come from the Spirit of God as you live on the edge of eternity. And because we live on the edge of eternity, don't leave today without asking yourself what unbelievers you could begin to pray for and invite to come worship with us some Sunday in the hopes that God might reveal their hearts, cause them to repent, and worship Jesus by the Spirit, eternal life does hang in the balance for them.

When God is among his people we can expect that he will speak clearly to us through his Spirit and that when he does, Jesus will be lifted up as the only sacrifice for sin and the only ultimate hope for this life and eternity for all who are there.