

## **“Strive for the Greater Gifts”**

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum  
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*<sup>12</sup>... just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... <sup>26</sup>If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.*

*<sup>27</sup>Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. <sup>28</sup>And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. <sup>29</sup>Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? <sup>30</sup>Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? <sup>31</sup>But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. (1 Corinthians 12:12, 26-31)*

As human beings, we really like to rank things. It doesn't matter what it is... sports teams, albums, colleges, restaurants, movies... people love to argue over which one is best. And we know this starts early. Just think of playgrounds around the world, where kids learn early on about rank and status.

I once heard a story of three boys in a school yard bragging about their fathers. The first boy says, "My Dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, calls it a poem, and they give him \$100."

The second boy says, "That's nothing. My Dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, calls it a song, and they give him \$200."

The third boy says, "I got you both beat. My Dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, calls it a sermon... and it takes eight people to collect all the money!"

Whatever we are doing, we love to measure value and we love to rank success. But the question for today is whether that is a healthy thing. As legendary football coach Mike Ditka once said, "Success is not measured by money or power or social rank. Success is measured by your discipline and inner peace."

Then again, Ditka doesn't even break the top 25 on the list of the best NFL coaches of all time. So what does he know? One lousy Superbowl win? Please.

I bring this up because it is clear from the letters Paul wrote to the church in Corinth that the people in that church were spending a whole lot of time squabbling over rank and status. Some Corinthians thought a preacher named Apollos had the best spiritual gifts and leadership potential. Others backed Paul. Another group lined up behind the Apostle Peter, and there may have even been a "Christ party," which I guess was comprised of people who didn't really like any of those guys.<sup>1</sup>

Admittedly, this should not have been a surprise. When it comes to our leaders, a healthy debate over who is best suited for the job is not a bad thing. This is exactly what baseball managers are doing right now. What kind of talent do they need the

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Campbell, "Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to a community in the middle of a culture war, The Christian Century, <https://www.christiancentury.org>, January 3, 2018.



most? Do they want better offense or better defense? If its offense, do they want a power hitter or do they need someone who gets on base consistently? If it's defense they need, is it sure gloves in the infield, speed in the outfield, or pitchers in the bullpen? In short, what gifts and abilities are most needed by the team, *right now*? What will help us win, *right now*?

The church in Corinth was doing the same thing, only they were looking at spiritual gifts instead of athletic ones. And we know what those gifts were, because Paul lists them. One gift in the church was *sophia*, or **wisdom**, which refers to a lofty understanding of things both divine and human. According to Aristotle, true wisdom is always "striving after the best ends and using the best means."<sup>2</sup>

A related gift was *gnosis*, or **knowledge**, which is an ability to put wisdom into practice. It focuses on the practical challenges of getting things done.

Among the other gifts Paul mentions:

- **Faith** -- Much more than intellectual conviction, faith is a gift of passion and commitment, a force that guides what a person thinks, says, and does;
- **Healing** – a gift that was very much present in Corinth, as elders routinely prayed with the sick and anointed them with oil;
- **Prophecy** – which was not as much about predicting the future as it was about interpreting scripture;
- **The ability to discern spirits, to speak in tongues, and the ability to understand and interpret people speaking in tongues.**

All of these gifts were valuable, Paul said. And all of them were needed. They all came together in the church, to help the body of Christ live and breathe and be God's hands and feet in the world. To quote biblical scholar William Barclay, "*The picture we get is of a church vividly alive. Things happened; in fact, astonishing things happened. Life was heightened and intensified. There was nothing dull and ordinary about the early Church. Paul knew that all this vivid, powerful activity was the work of the Spirit who gave to each [person their] gift to use for all.*"<sup>3</sup>

But Paul also saw a problem in the Corinthian church. A lot of problems, actually. But one that he named very clearly had to do with their obsession with ranking. They ranked their leaders, saying some were better than others. They ranked spiritual gifts, saying some were more important than others. Some of that made sense, but things had clearly gotten out of control. Elitism and spiritual snobbery was growing stronger and stronger, pushing factions father and father apart, to the point that the fabric of the church in Corinth was beginning to fray and tear.

Paul drops the hammer on this one. "You can't go on like this," he says. "Quit the quarrelling. Quit claiming that your group is better than everyone else. Figure out how to be one body, working together." That's a paraphrase. What he actually said was this: "*Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.*"

But what Paul does next is brilliant. He didn't do everything right, but God gave Paul some real gifts, and one of them was rhetoric, a gift of persuading with words.

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 112.

In order to move the people away from ranking, he uses the language of ranking. After listing the various types of gifts, he makes it seem like he is about to pick the best ones. Paul is about to weigh in, end the big debate, and tell everyone what is most important, which will break the logjam on who should be in charge in Corinth. *“Strive for the greater gifts,”* Paul writes, *“and I will show you a more excellent way.”*

And the Corinthians eagerly flip the page of the letter. “Tell us, Paul! What are the greatest gifts of all!?”

But when they turn the page, in just a few short words they realize that Paul has no intention of saying which of those gifts is best, or which leader is the best. What he gives them is a strange digression, a radical and unexpected passage that doesn't seem to fit with anything else... except that it does. We usually hear it in weddings, but we read it just a few moments ago. *“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”*

True, this seems out of place, that is until we recognize what Paul wanted to do. Paul had no intention on ranking the spiritual gifts, because they were all important. They were all given by God. They all join together in the church, within the body of Christ, to bring the whole group to life... the help the whole group thrive. Each person, doing their part, depending on each other. In other words, the gift we have is not the most important thing. The most important thing is how we use that gift. Are we using that give to build up the body, or to tear it apart?

One of the greatest lessons I ever learned about understanding the Bible is called simply “the Rule of Love.” It is based on the teaching of Jesus, who gave us a firm and unambiguous ranking of spiritual priorities. *“Teacher,”* someone asked him, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”<sup>4</sup> Love God. Love your neighbor. Everything hangs on those two things.

If we apply this to the way we read and understand the Bible, which I would say is exactly what we must do, the “Rule of Love” suggests that everything that is written is based on love and intended for love. Saint Augustine, writing in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, put it this way. When we are reading the Bible, he said, we should *“carefully turn [it] over in our minds and meditate upon what we read, until we find an interpretation that tends to establish the reign of love.”* In other words, when reading the Bible, we must assume that the passage rests upon a foundation of love, both for God, and for other people. If we are reading it that way, we are probably on the right track. At the same time, if we are not reading it in love, if we do not wield the truth of scripture in love, we are probably getting it wrong. Very wrong.

I would argue that the Rule of Love is not limited to reading the Bible. That rule applies to living. Everything about our living. What are we striving for? What are we hoping for? How are we going about doing our jobs... leading our families... serving our community? What do we think we need to win, right now?

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 22:36-40.

The Rule of Love says that the answer is not in the skills we have, the gifts we have. It's not in an office we hold or the status we claim. What matters is how we use the gifts we are given. You might have the gift of speaking in tongues, Paul says, but if you don't speak with love, you are just banging a noisy, discordant gong. You might have prophetic powers, you might be wise, or practical, you might even have great faith, but if you don't use your gift with love, you do nothing. You **are** nothing.

What then is greatest? What stands above it all? "*Faith, hope, and love,*" Paul says, "*and the greatest of these is love.*"<sup>5</sup> It's not what you have, but how you live. It's not who you beat, but how you serve, and how you love.

To those who have answered the call to service, who will soon be ordained as officers in the church of Jesus Christ, you are incredibly gifted people. This congregation is blessed to have those gifts, and to have you.

That being said, there is no one here today who does not possess gifts that we need here, gifts that God wants here. Whether you think about it this way or not, you are all part of the body of Christ. You all have gifts to share. But just having a gift is not enough. It is how we use the gifts that God has entrusted to us. And this body needs what you have to offer. Every person here can make us better, make us stronger, and help us all to be more faithful.

A final word before we ordain and install a new group of leaders here at Larchmont Avenue Church. In these moments, our new leaders will be asked to answer a set of questions. As those questions are asked and answered, I invite you to listen to what is being asked. Listen to what is valued. Listen to what ranks highest in the church of Jesus Christ. Do you think those questions will be about wealth or earning potential? Do you think they will be about social status or political influence? Will they demand physical strength or beauty? Listen closely to the questions, because they speak volumes about what ranks highest in the eyes of God and the reign of Christ. Listen to the questions and see if you can hear the Rule of Love.

"Strive for the greater gifts," we are told, and God will show us a more excellent way. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:13.