

1 Corinthians 14:12–20

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church. Wherefore let him that speaketh in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also. Else when thou shalt bless with the spirit, how shall he that occupieth the room of the unlearned say Amen at thy giving of thanks, seeing he understandeth not what thou sayest? For thou verily givest thanks well, but the other is not edified. I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all: yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.

Seek to Excel to the Edifying of the Church

Verse 12 delivers a quiet rebuke. The Corinthians were zealous for spiritual manifestations — that is acknowledged. But they were using that zeal as an instrument to set self off, rather than bowing it to the edifying of the church. These two things — zeal for the spiritual, and the edifying of the church — ought to have been the same direction. Instead they had come apart. And so the apostle must say: since you are zealous for these things, seek to excel in them for the edifying of the church.

Verse 13 follows: *wherefore* — on account of that, the tongue-speaker must pray that he may interpret. The consequence of having that gift is the responsibility to ensure that the assembly receives the benefit of it. He may or may not have the gift of interpretation; later we learn it is a separate and complementary gift. But the duty of seeking the edification of the assembly falls on the one who would exercise any gift within it.

My Spirit Prayeth — But My Understanding Is Unfruitful

Verse 14 is important for understanding what is and is not being said about the tongue-speaker's state. *If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful.* The spirit here — with a lowercase s — is the rational faculty of the man himself. Scripture speaks of man as spirit, soul, and body. The spirit of a man is the candle of the Lord, searching the inward parts. *Who knows the things of a man except the spirit of a man which is in him?* It is the intelligent, God-connected faculty. The soul is the seat of the affections, the will, the responsible self before God.

When the tongue-speaker prays in the spirit, his rational faculty is engaged — this is not gibberish or ecstatic utterance with no content. He understands what he is saying. But his understanding is unfruitful: it does not bear fruit in the assembly. No one else was edified. Fruit supposes life; fruit in the assembly is edification. His own grasp of what was uttered is one thing — but that grasp produced nothing in the hearers because the thing was never rendered intelligible to them. That is where his understanding is unfruitful. It is not that he has no understanding — verse 19 will confirm that he does — but it produced no harvest among the saints.

I Will Pray with the Spirit and with the Understanding Also

Verse 15 draws the contrast. *I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also*. The reference is to praying in tongues on one side and praying in intelligible speech on the other. When one blesses with the spirit — that is, gives thanks in a tongue — verse 16 presses the consequence: how shall he that occupies the place of the simple Christian say Amen at the giving of thanks, seeing he does not understand what is said? The Amen cannot be given without understanding. And the giving of thanks, however well-directed toward God, does not edify the other who cannot join in it.

The same principle governs singing. *I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also*. Ephesians 5:19 speaks of *making melody in your heart to the Lord*, and Colossians 3:16 of *singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord*. Whether it is ministry, prayer, or singing, the apostle requires that intelligibility be present, otherwise there is no edification. The activities named in these verses — praying, singing, blessing, saying Amen, giving thanks — are all genuine and beautiful privileges. There is no showing off in any of them. God is the object before the soul in all of them. That is how it is meant to be in the assembly: God before the soul, not the flesh.

Thou Verily Givest Thanks Well — But the Other Is Not Edified

Verse 17 is notable: *thou verily givest thanks well*. The apostle is not suggesting that the giving of thanks in tongues was in any way false or unworthy in itself — the thanksgiving was genuine and well-directed. But the other is not edified. The problem is not the thanksgiving but the absence of intelligibility that would have allowed others to share in it. This is implicit evidence against the notion that tongues were ecstatic utterance with no content: how could anyone be said to give thanks *well* in unintelligible gibberish? Genuine thanksgiving to God requires genuine content — it is an intelligent act of the spirit addressed to God. The issue is only that others cannot join in.

I Speak with Tongues More Than Ye All

Verse 18 is a remarkable statement: *I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all*. The apostle had this gift in a superlative degree — exceeding the entire Corinthian assembly, which was itself abundantly gifted (*ye come behind in no gift*). He was not speaking from jealousy, nor from ignorance of what tongues were, nor from some deficiency of his own. He spoke from a position of greater possession of the very thing he was regulating.

Yet: *in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue*. The contrast is between five words intelligibly uttered and ten thousand words in an uninterpreted tongue. The ratio is deliberately extreme. He is not advocating brevity for its own sake — he is contrasting what edifies with what does not. Five words from God are enough. Nathan the prophet, when he came to David, said three words: *Thou art the man*. The finger on Belshazzar's wall wrote a few words. The power is not in the quantity but in the intelligibility and the source. What enters the soul through the conscience, addressed to the heart — that is what matters.

Be Not Children in Understanding

Verse 20 delivers a direct word: *brethren, be not children in understanding — howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men*. The Corinthians were acting like children with a shiny new toy they could not get enough of. The gift of tongues had become an occupation — something spectacular, something the flesh could make much of, something by which one could be noticed and set apart. That is precisely what children do with a new and exciting thing: they cannot put it down, they will not share it, they want it for themselves.

In malice, on the other hand, he says to be as babes. A little babe has no ill will toward others. And there were likely grounds for supposing that quite a lot of ill

will was being generated in that assembly in the midst of all the show — the party spirit already seen in chapter 1, the puffing up, the striving for pre-eminence. In all of that they were to be like babes — having none of it. But in their understanding — in their grasp of what the gifts were for and how they were to be used — they were to be grown men.

The apostle had already had to say in chapter 3: *I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ*. That was a terrible thing — that a year and a half of apostolic ministry had not moved them further than that. Their stunted spiritual growth was showing itself precisely in this childish misuse of gift. And all of it pointed back to the same root: self at the centre, not Christ; seeking one's own, not the edification of the assembly.

— *Study ends* —