

God is really among you!

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Date: 01 October 2023

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[0 : 00] This morning's reading is from 1 Corinthians 14, 1-25, on page 1154. So, 1 Corinthians 14, 1-25.

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy. For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them, the utter mysteries by the Spirit.

But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging, and comfort. Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the Church.

I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets so that the Church may be edified.

Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played, unless there is a distinction in the notes?

[1 : 09] Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?

You will just be speaking into the air. And the speaker is a foreigner to me.

So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the Church. For this reason, the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say.

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding. I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.

Otherwise, when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else who is now put in the position of an inquirer say amen to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying?

[2 : 12] If you are giving thanks well enough, you are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified. I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. But in the Church, I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than 10,000 words in a tongue.

Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil, be infants, but in your thinking, be adults. In the law it is written, Tongues then are a sign, not for believers, but for unbelievers.

Prophecy, however, is not for unbelievers, but for believers. So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in, while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare.

So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, God is really among you. Amen. Good morning, St. Silas.

[3 : 28] Thanks, George, for reading that for us. If we've not met, my name is Martin Ayers, I'm the lead pastor here. And if you're visiting today, what we do as a church is week by week, our normal pattern, our kind of regular diet, is to work through books of the Bible, chapter by chapter, so that we're letting God set the agenda and we're not kind of just picking the bits of the Bible we like.

And so we're in this series looking at this letter, 1 Corinthians, a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a church that he planted a few years before. And at this stage, they've written to him with some questions.

And he started addressing this question at the beginning of chapter 12, as we'll see. As ever, you can find an outline inside the notice sheet. And we're going to ask for God's help as we turn to his word.

So let me lead us in a prayer. Gracious Heavenly Father and mighty Creator God, we praise you that you made us and that you have redeemed us in Christ and have given us the gift of your Holy Spirit.

We ask that you will be at work in each of us this morning by your Spirit as we come to your word. Holy Spirit, speak to us, we pray, and give us ears to hear, minds open to change, and hearts ready to respond rightly to you.

[4 : 46] For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I wonder what you are striving for in life. Most of us will be striving for things.

But for lots of us, perhaps we'll think of our big goals that we're really striving for in life as things that are going on during the week. Maybe in working life or in study or something to do with home life.

We have ambitions, things we're aiming for. And maybe we then feel like church is just something that happens that we go along to. But the Apostle Paul calls us to strive for something this morning in the Christian life.

We're actually told elsewhere in the Bible to strive in the Christian life. The Bible uses the language of pressing on and straining towards the goal of winning the prize of going to heaven, of the new creation.

And so there's this idea of, that idea of striving is striving to keep going as a Christian, to persevere. We're told in Hebrews chapter 12 to strive for holiness, to be more like Christ.

[5 : 52] Strive for holiness, because without holiness no one will see the Lord, Hebrews 12. And here in 1 Corinthians, we were told in chapter 12 verse 31, which you can just see on the same page as chapter 14.

Chapter 12 verse 31, we're told eagerly desire the greater gifts. So this isn't something we can earn by our striving. We're not trying to put merit in to get payback because it's a gift from God.

But Paul is describing here how we're to have an appropriate longing for certain gifts from God. And it makes us ask, what does he mean?

What kind of gifts are greater gifts? The Corinthians, we know from kind of the way this is written, that this church, they had a preoccupation with one of the gifts of the Spirit.

It was the gift of tongues. And we can see that in the way that this, the way Paul puts out his teaching, his material. But Paul started this section addressing that at the start of chapter 12.

[6 : 59] He says, now about gifts of the Spirit. And he carries on here, chapter 14 verse 1, where he left off at the end of chapter 12.

So we have, now eagerly desire the greater gifts, end of chapter 12. And the beginning of chapter 14, which George has read for us, it says, follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit.

And then he tells us where he's going this morning. What does he think are the greater gifts? He says, especially prophecy. And it's good to understand that just as this church in Corinth were finding the issue of gifts of the Spirit divisive and difficult, it's an issue that can be divisive in any Christian community today.

So there are people in our church who went to university and joined the Christian union. And in their season of that life of being in the Christian union, that the community, the Christian union that was meant to be, the coming together in unity of Christian believers to reach out and share Jesus with people who don't know him, was actually kind of derailed by arguments about the role and place of spiritual gifts between charismatics and non-charismatics.

And in a church, it can become divisive as you get churches where there are even schisms. There are groups within a church who leave because they feel that the role and place of spiritual gift is being misunderstood in a particular church.

[8 : 36] Certainly in our church, these are at least important talking points. And they are potential areas of division. And the answers are not simple in terms of what spiritual gifts look like today and how to make room in our Christian lives and our church life to practice them appropriately.

In our own church, I've heard several different people describe themselves as charismatic with a safety belt on, which can sound like, oh yeah, I like that, I like that idea. But actually when you think about it, what does that actually mean?

It just begs the questions, well, when does this safety belt kick in exactly? And what kind of safety belt is it? And what are we saying about the Holy Spirit and his agenda for us?

If we feel like if we didn't have a safety belt on, we'll end up in some kind of calamity. So what does God say about all of this? Well, we heard Paul begin in chapter 12 by clarifying two weeks ago that every Christian is a spiritual person.

So we're not to think, as we look at gifts of the Spirit, that you're more spiritual if you've got certain gifts and you're less spiritual if you don't have them.

[9 : 50] The spiritual people are the people who believe in Jesus and have responded rightly to him. It's only by miraculous work of the Holy Spirit in your life that you can see God's glory in Jesus.

You see that he is God's promised rescuing king who came to die for our sins and rose to rule. If you believe that, you are a spiritual person because the Spirit has given you that insight.

Then in chapter 12, we also heard that by the Holy Spirit's good design, he's made us all different. So he freely distributes different gifts to us as a community of God's people for the common good.

And he described it as we're like different parts of the body of Christ. So we're different, but we all belong to the body and we all need each other. Then last week from chapter 13, we heard about love.

Love is the essential ingredient of church life and love is the thing that will last. So when we as God's people love each other, we kind of display the presence of God among us.

[10 : 57] And because heaven will be a world of love, when we love each other well, with divine love, we kind of, the future breaks into the present in our community.

So that has to be ringing in our ears as we come to chapter 14 and we hear Paul's big idea for this morning. Prophecy is the greater gift that we should eagerly desire to lovingly use in our church life.

And Paul gives us three reasons why this morning in our passage. I've put them on the sheets. Prophecy is the thing to aim for. Why? Because first, prophecy builds up other believers.

Paul is bold enough to clearly rank the gifts in verse 5. If you have a look, he says, Why does he say that?

So that the church may be edified. That's the language of building, being built up. He says a similar thing in verse 12, if you have a look there. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.

[12 : 12] That's the key idea. Upbuilding the community of believers. So what is prophecy? Well, the word prophet, the idea of being a prophet is simply a mouthpiece for God.

People who are given the word of God to bring to other people so that they're speaking for God are prophets. And in the Old Testament, we have the writing prophets.

We have written down for us what the certain prophets before Christ came, the words they had from God as messengers. Moses was a prophet.

Elijah was a prophet. Ezekiel, Isaiah, and so on. And they were God's covenant enforcers. That's a great way to understand the prophets of the Old Testament. The relationship between God and his people was based on binding promises called a covenant.

And when the people were kind of straying from that covenant relationship, they weren't trusting God, God sent messengers in his grace to call them back. And they did two kinds of things.

[13 : 16] They did foretelling and forth telling. Foretelling was often they would make a prediction that if the people continued to live faithlessly, God would act in judgment.

There was a kind of prediction element to their prophecies. And there was foretelling, speaking forth the truth about God from God for the people. And the words of the prophets of the Old Testament carry great authority.

So that how you responded to that prophet and his words was an exact representation of how you were responding to God himself. Jesus himself was fully committed to fulfilling all that was written about him by the prophets in his righteous life.

Now when we come to the New Testament and we learn about the gift of prophecy for the church, prophecy begins to be different. And a key difference is in the authority that it carries.

So when the church hears a prophecy, we learn next week in verse 29 of this chapter that that prophecy is to be weighed up against the authority of Scripture. And in 1 Thessalonians 5, which is another letter by the Apostle Paul to a church, he says this, Do not treat prophecies with contempt, but test them all.

[14 : 34] Hold on to what is good. Reject every kind of evil. So we test prophecies. We weigh it up. In fact, the equivalent for us of the Old Testament prophet is the New Testament apostles.

Paul sees the apostles as a closed group. We see that in chapter 15 of this letter. He's going to talk about Jesus' resurrection appearances, the people he appeared to alive again after he died.

And he talks about his appearances to the apostles, those who were appointed by him to bring his truth to the church. And he talks about how, last of all, Jesus appeared to him.

And then he says, For I am the least of the apostles. So the apostles were a closed group of people commissioned by Jesus, the risen Jesus, to bring his words to his people.

We, the church, have the truth from the apostles handed down to us here in the scriptures. As each book of the New Testament has either as its author or its source, those apostles.

[15 : 41] And so how we respond to the words of the Bible is the representation of how we're responding to God. So what about the gift of prophecy in the church?

Well, God promised that, through the prophets, through the Old Testament prophets, that when the Messiah comes, there would be a new age would dawn. And the key mark of this new age is that the Holy Spirit will be a gift to every believer.

And through that gift of the Spirit, every believer will be able to prophesy. Then after Jesus ascends to heaven, in Acts chapter 2, we hear of the day that the Holy Spirit came, the day of Pentecost.

And Jesus is in heaven. He sends the Spirit. He asks the Father to send the Spirit. The disciples are in Jerusalem. And this phenomenon occurs of them speaking in different languages, the truth about God.

And Peter gets up, the apostle Peter, and he explains what's happening. He says, this is the fulfillment of the prophecy in Joel chapter 2, the prophet Joel, that in the last days, God would give his Holy Spirit to all believers and they will all prophesy.

[16 : 54] So what did that look like? That movement of the Spirit dwelling in every believer? Well, they declared the wonders of God. They were forth-telling. They were speaking of the wonders of God to the people around them.

So today, I think we need a broad understanding of what prophecy is today. Wherever Spirit-filled Christians, and every Christian has the Spirit, wherever Spirit-filled Christians are declaring the wonders of God, speaking God's Word to one another, they're being prophetic.

And that gift is no longer restricted to a select group of people. We all have the Spirit and we all have the Word. And God can use any of us to speak words of encouragement to each other.

I think really helpful on that is that in this chapter here, verse 3, where he, 1 Corinthians 14, verse 3, Paul describes the effect of prophecy in the church.

Verse 3, but the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging, and comfort. In other words, when a Spirit-filled Christian speaks God's truth to someone else, or to a group, or to a community, in an insightful and pastorally relevant way, and it leads to them being challenged or comforted, and ultimately in them being built up in the Christian faith, that person is being prophetic to them.

[18 : 20] The Spirit is enabling them to build up one of His people in the Word. Sometimes, God the Holy Spirit may well reveal something to a Christian spontaneously for them to share with others that's profoundly helpful to them.

Lots of the time, though, it will be the everyday experience of the Spirit prompting a Christian to bring Scripture to bear on the life of another Christian or a community of Christians.

So, in a brilliant way that I didn't plan, this chapter follows on from our Vision Sunday just a few weeks ago. We were talking about how we want to listen to God's calling to us to be a community where we're helping each other learn Christ so that we can walk into church, each of us, every one of us, expectantly, not just for what we might hear and what God might say to us, but for how we might be used by God every time we walk into church, that we would come to church and we've prayed that God would use us this morning or in the evening when we go, to be an instrument in God's hands to encourage someone else, that by who we sit with or who we chat to over coffee, we might have an opportunity to strengthen and encourage somebody speaking God's word to them.

You pray with another Christian about something and as you reflect on their situation, maybe a few days later, you find that some verses from the Bible come to your mind that you sense are especially relevant and helpful for them in their situation and perhaps you message them or you call them and you share those with them or you have a conversation with someone over coffee after church and you get on to talking about the sermon and you're able to just say something that speaks of the implications that you took from what the Bible was saying that morning, what God was saying through the Bible.

Or you go along to your small group, to your roots group or growth group and someone in the group shares something that they say, I wonder if one of the implications of this passage is this and it's something you hadn't thought of but it's especially helpful for you.

[20 : 43] Sometimes I find when I'm leading a Bible study, somebody comes and shares that and I feel like I've done work on the text myself and someone who's never been before shares something that I've never seen and there's the Holy Spirit at work building up his people through prophetic insight into what's going on.

The Spirit at work through his people and Paul is saying here that in church life prophecy is the gift for us to aim for with one another as we pray that God will give us the insight to speak helpfully to those who don't yet believe in Jesus and to each other.

It builds up the church. So what about tongues then? This gift of tongues that the Corinthians were very preoccupied with. Well that's our second point. Tongues don't build up other believers because they can't understand.

We thought two weeks ago about what the gift of tongues is. Some people think it's the gift of other languages which happened at Pentecost. It might be.

For my money I don't think it is that because it strikes me as you read 1 Corinthians 14 that the key mark of this gift that Paul says limits it is that people can't understand it.

[21 : 59] And when he says that we should pray for the gift of interpretation I don't think he's meaning that someone would turn up at church that week who knows the language that's being spoken. I think he's talking there about something different.

So it seems to me the other thing just to mention about the distinctive in the gift of tongues in this passage is that it's clearly directed towards God. So have a look at verse 2 he says for anyone who speaks in the tongue does not speak to people but to God.

And then he says in verse 3 to contrast that the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening encouraging and comfort. So the gift of tongues in Corinth seems to be a gift by which the Holy Spirit allows some believers in certain times in their prayer life to stop having to think about articulating words and instead just to enjoy close communion with God.

It might be that the Holy Spirit gives that gift to someone when they're praying because they feel especially anxious about something and troubled and they're given the gift the blessing of not needing to kind of say it in words anymore just to what they speak is more just a babble because they're not thinking about the words and to someone listening to them it sounds like a different language but for them it's because they've been freed from having to kind of put it into words and it might be that that comes not because of anxiety but because of joy.

Somebody is particularly joyful about who God is and knowing God and they pray in a kind of what sounds like a different language. So I think that makes sense of what Paul's describing here and it's worth noticing how positive the Apostle Paul is about that gift.

[23 : 52] So he says in verse 14 that if you pray in tongues your spirit prays. So it's kind of your inward being is talking to God.

In verse 4 he says that speaking in tongues edifies the person who's praying and in verse 18 Paul says he thanks God that he speaks in tongues more than all of them.

He says in verse 5 I would like every one of you to speak in tongues. What Paul discourages though is using that gift when we come together as a church.

So have a look with me at verse 5 he says I would like every one of you to speak in tongues but even more to prophesy the one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues unless someone interprets so that the church may be edified.

So he leaves open for us there doesn't he the possibility that the person who has that gift of speaking to God in tongues also has an interpretation of what that means that is intelligible to other people so they can bring that to the gathering or that somebody else has this gift of interpretation for the tongue.

[25 : 10] So again as I said I don't think it's talking about a different language that the translation is there but it may still be that as somebody is speaking in tongues the Holy Spirit gives someone else an ability to bring a message that is intelligible from God maybe from the scriptures that corresponds with how that person is praying.

So in that kind of situation the interpretation can be used to encourage the church but Paul's key concern is that we can't be built up in our faith our faith can't be strengthened with words we can't understand.

So he says in verse 18 I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you but in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

so what do we do then if we as a church have someone who says to the leadership I think I've got this gift of tongues can I share it with the church?

Well I take it that we'd want to ask them do they think they have an interpretation of that gift that would be intelligible or we'd need to find out does someone else have that gift of interpretation and if they do we could share that gift because we could be sharing a message people can understand but the principle is when we gather intelligibility and we can use that same principle in other ways as a church it's why we use a modern translation of the Bible today so that we're not worshipping in a way that requires a knowledge of middle English or even of Latin to be able to engage with God which the church in Scotland has had in the past we need to be careful when we're using old liturgy so liturgy that we will often use from time to time as a church for example when we are confessing our sins or we're having the Lord's Supper together we have to be careful that it's intelligible there is great value and richness in using old prayers because they've stood the test of time and there's a sense of praying prayers that God's people in generations past have prayed so there is blessing in that but only if we can understand what's being said otherwise we leave people on the outside because they don't have a good enough knowledge of old fashioned English it's the same when we sing older hymns that we have to be careful again it's great to sing older hymns because there were just as many songs about Jesus being written in those generations past as there are now and when you sing an older hymn it's one of the best ones because it's one of the ones that survived that didn't get kind of didn't just fall away all the time at the same time we need to make sure that the words are intelligible so that we're being built up by what we're singing worshipping God is about our hearts our hearts being engaged in love for him but God engages our hearts through our minds understanding truth about him and Paul says as well that we should also be concerned for not yet believing guests who come into the gathering he seems to assume that that would happen in the early church and we know it happens to us week by week today and we love that as a church having guests who are looking in at Jesus so Paul says that's the third reason why prophecy is the thing to aim for thirdly prophecy can move visitors to worship God so in verse 21

[28 : 52] Paul quotes from the prophet Isaiah when he says in the Lord is written and he has this promise from Isaiah in verse 21 that God would speak to his people Israel at that time with other tongues and then he says quite a difficult verse to understand verse 22 tongues then are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers prophecy however is not for unbelievers but for believers what does he mean by that well the Corinthians might have been saying we really want to use our gift of tongues in the gathered church because as people speak in tongues it's so kind of it's such a strange phenomenon that visitors will come in and they'll say wow this must be from God God must your God must be the real God and he must be here and Paul says actually it goes the other way he sees it completely the other way he says when people come in and because you're speaking in tongues they can't understand they are left on the outside it becomes a sign confirming them in their unbelief so this moment that he's mentioning in verse 21 in Israel's history when God spoke to his people in foreign tongues it was a sign that confirmed they were under his judgment

God had been speaking to his people clearly through the prophet Isaiah in simple language calling them to trust him and live for him and they weren't willing to listen and so he hands them over with this declaration what he means by the moment coming the day coming when they'll be spoken to in foreign tongues is that the Assyrians are going to invade the land so when that happens it will be a sign confirming that they're under God's judgment when they can't understand and a similar thing goes on today in church in verse 23 Paul's saying if the church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues and inquirers or unbelievers come in they're going to think that this is madness this isn't real this is these guys are out of their mind on the other hand when God's people are looking to speak God's word to each other with clarity and spirit given pastoral insight the spirit can be at work among us and do what we most long for really if you look at verse 24 he says if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare and the result looks like a kind of spontaneous conversion maybe in today's times maybe not then in house churches but in today's times someone wanders in because they wanted to see the building and they stay for the service and they stay around they meet Christians verse 25 as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare so they will fall down and worship God exclaiming

God is really among you so we might think that striving to be intelligible striving to be clearly understood when we come together that that might make our church meetings seem too ordinary too much like any other gathering too focused on one another rather than engaging with God in transcendent holy worship Paul sees it the other way when we make the goal of our words and our gifts loving other people well and building them up the outcome can be for the visitor a tangible sense that God is really among us among this people so that the person who comes in as a visitor is convicted and the secrets of their hearts are laid bare that's this idea of being convicted of their sin that they've not lived God's way and that Jesus is the saviour they need and that they can trust him and be forgiven we can't manipulate the Holy Spirit to come and do that as we strive to sort of speak God's word to each other when Jesus met Nicodemus in John chapter 3 he talks about the Spirit's work being like the wind that just as the wind blows wherever it pleases so with the Spirit you don't know where it's come from or where it's going but these verses encourage us and urge us

I think the implication is that we should pray for the Spirit to be at work like that when we gather what we're seeing right through this chapter is that Paul assumes that we would know that the Holy Spirit is in the business of building he's not off doing some other work separate to the Father and the Son he's building the body of Christ as he convicts people who visit or spend time with Christians with the Bible of their sin and of who Jesus is and as he builds up his people to maturity and this happens all the time but there are times when it happens with deeper intensity that we can pray for I was reading this week about the revival that happened on the Isle of Lewis in 1952 so two ladies were particularly troubled living on the Isle of Lewis that no young people went to their church and they started praying through the night together twice a week that God would act and have mercy and then they started being joined by other people and it culminated in them inviting a speaker to go to the Isle of Lewis and to preach the gospel at a meeting that they would invite people to so they had this meeting one evening and 200 people came together in this building that held 800 and they had this meeting on the evening and it finished about 10pm and it was a good meeting not extraordinary but a good meeting and then they opened the doors of the church building and there were 600 people outside and they invited them in some of them had been at a dance in the town and they'd turned the music off and together had a sense they had to go to church and they'd seen the lights on in the church they'd gone they were waiting outside they were brought in and the first thing they did together was they sang a psalm it's a free church sang a psalm and then as the man tried to get to the pulpit again the speaker to preach the gospel he found a school teacher prostrate on the floor praying would there be mercy for her as well and he preached the gospel that night and many people were converted and it spilt out over the island in the days and weeks that followed revival like that it's like an intensification of the ordinary miraculous work the everyday miraculous work the Holy Spirit is doing in the world today and I think 1 Corinthians 14 encourages us to pray that God would work like that here in our times what do we strive for?

we're striving to play our role in the Holy Spirit building project by being a community where we hear God's word for our good and we're also able to share God's word with others for their good in language they can understand and we pray expectantly watchfully that the Spirit could take that up and use it to save people and to grow us in our faith let's pray together Heavenly Father we thank you for the blessing of hearing your voice as your Spirit is at work through your word and we ask Heavenly Father may your Spirit be at work in us and through us whenever we gather so that there will be a tangible sense for us and for all who visit that you really are here you really are among your people stir us up we pray and draw each of us more closely to yourself for we ask in Jesus name

[37 : 09] Amen heaven I know the Recht of 86 a moment and some of