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1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13

BODY – BUILDING
“Keeping Our Gifts In Context”

“Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.”

The summer before my senior year in seminary, I had a job working security at the investment firm of Merrill Lynch in Princeton, New Jersey.

The job was “not” nearly as glamorous as it sounds!

For starters, you can only be so cool traipsing around in gray polyester pants and a short-sleeve white polyester shirt with a blue & red clip-on tie. But, that was my uniform – an outfit which I’m sure struck fear into the hearts of nefarious evil-doers everywhere!

And, just in case I did run into trouble?

Well, I wasn’t packing any heat! My standard-issued weapon was a walkie-talkie – which was connected to other security guards with clip-on ties and walkie-talkies.

I guess if we ever ran into trouble at least we could have kept in touch and told one another where we were hiding.

And, my most important duty of the day?

Actually, it was taking everybody’s supper order and then running out to pick it up.

All in all, a pretty easy – if not exactly “stimulating” gig.

But, if there was really one cool part of the job, it was when they’d let me drive the corporate Lincoln Continental.

Now, I didn't get to drive the Lincoln every day.

Only when something special was going on – like when the CEO flew in or I had to transport some VIP.

Then I got behind the wheel of that beauty and soaked it all in.

You see, at the time, I owned an '86 Chevy Cavalier myself.

And, nothing against Cavaliers – that car served me well. But, the difference between driving it and easing into the plush leather seat of a Lincoln, was like night and day.

I'd never ridden in anything as smooth as that Lincoln in all my life!

It was like riding on a cloud of air!

And, the controls?

Well, let's just say I could spend hours moving the electric seats back and forth and playing with all the little doo-hickeys and gizmos inside.

Maybe that's why they never gave me a weapon!

But seriously, getting the keys to the Lincoln and being told that it was mine for the next 8 hours, was a real treat.

The only downside was that I had to give it back, of course, when my shift was over!

You see, Merrill Lynch gave me a job to do and then equipped me for that job by loaning me their car.

I got to drive it...

I got to enjoy it...

But, in the end, I had to give it back – because it really wasn't mine!

It was simply on loan for a little while.

Well, this is one of the ways we can think of Spiritual Gifts.

You see, when it comes right down to it, whatever gifts God has given us...

Whatever gifts we possess and are using right now...

They really aren't ours!

At least, not in a permanent sense!

They're simply on loan to us from God.

And, when God's purposes are accomplished everything He's loaned us is going to be returned to Him in the end.

But, that's okay! Because the gifts themselves are meant for a far greater purpose!

Now, it would've been good for the Christians in Corinth to have remembered that.

Because when it came to Spiritual Gifts, they generally got an "A" for effort but an "F" for application and understanding.

What I mean is this...

Spiritual Gifts were a definite problem for the Corinthians.

Not that they didn't have them!

They had them in abundance!

Their problem was a misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of Spiritual Gifts.

You see, rather than seeing these gifts as given by God for the building up of the entire church, they began turning them into spiritual status symbols – so

that those with the more “spectacular” gifts began looking down on those whose gifts maybe weren’t quite as flamboyant.

And, as you might expect, that didn’t do a lot to create unity and foster fellowship in the church!

That’s why Paul spends a lot of time – 3 chapters really – talking about Spiritual Gifts in his letter to the Corinthians.

He wants to correct their misunderstandings and help them see their gifts in the greater context.

And, at the heart of his discussion comes this magnificent interlude in which Paul urges the Corinthians to remember just what binds all these gifts together -- and what it is that gives them meaning.

Now, for a lot of folks, 1 Corinthians 13 – what’s come to be known as the Love Chapter – is a flowery passage of Scripture mostly recited at weddings – but rarely heard in context...

Much less understood and fully embraced.

But, the fact is that in these verses Paul’s showing the Corinthians what they’ve been missing in their over-exuberant pursuit of Spiritual Gifts.

They’d been missing the context in which Spiritual Gifts have to be practiced and the only framework in which these gifts have any meaning or make any sense.

I mean...

You might think of it as standing in front of the stove at home and cooking up a big pot of vegetable soup.

So, you throw in your carrots – onions – potatoes – your celery – seasoning and whatnot. You do all that, but, without your stock...

Whatever it is – chicken broth or beef – the base that holds everything else together...

Without “that” you really don’t have yourself any soup!

Well, that’s what Paul’s saying here in a much more eloquent way.

Love is the stock – it’s the base – which holds everything together.

Without it, everything else is just a random sampling of ingredients!

Spiritual Gifts like tongues – prophecy – knowledge – faith – generosity – and even self-sacrifice, mean nothing in isolation or by themselves.

Only as they’re practiced in Love can they truly be considered gifts from God!

Love’s the only context in which these things have any meaning or make any sense.

Now, it’s interesting, of course, that Paul mentions some of the specific Spiritual Gifts that were apparently being taken out of context.

These were some of the problem areas for the Corinthians.

And, of all these gifts that were being misused, misunderstood and misapplied – it seems, the gift of speaking in tongues was heading the list!

Now, why tongues?

Was it the most visible – the most spectacular of all the gifts there in Corinth?

Was there something in their pagan culture and background which made the gift of tongues especially appealing?

Whatever it was – and Lord willing we’ll address the gift of tongues later on in this series – Paul wants to show them that it’s all meaningless without Love!

Even something as charismatic as speaking in tongues!

Love is really the key!

But, what is Love?

Well, for starters, it's probably not what you think!

And, it's certainly not what's portrayed in Hollywood or on TV these days.

What passes for Love in the media and generally in culture nowadays – is actually a pretty self-centered thing!

For example...

Judah Thomas, who's one of the pastors at Faith Living Church in Plantsville, Connecticut, tells the following story. He says:

I was in the supermarket one day, and a lady came down the aisle whom I could barely see over the top of her groceries.

I got somewhat frightened because she seemed to be heading straight for me.

She screeched to a halt within a few feet of me – peered over her load – wagged her finger – and said, *"I left your church. I left your church."*

So I said, *"Well, if it's my church, I think that was a very wise decision. If it's my church, I think I'm going to leave too."*

She said, *"Don't you want to know why I left?"*

I said, *"No, not particularly, but I think I'm going to find out."*

And I was right.

She said, *"You weren't meeting my needs."*

I answered, *“I don’t ever recollect seeing you before, let alone talking to you, let alone knowing your needs. Did you ever tell anyone specifically what your needs were?”*

She couldn’t recall that she had, so I raised another question.

“Can you tell me, if we have 5,000 people sitting in that church, all with your attitude, how anybody’s needs are going to be met?”

“If you reserve the right to have that attitude,” Thomas continued, *“then you must give everybody the freedom to have that attitude. And if everybody has that attitude, who on earth is going to do all the need-meeting?”*

Standing her ground, she demanded, *“Then you tell me who will.”*

Relieved, I said, *“I thought you’d never ask.”*

“This is what will work,” he said: *“when people stop sitting in the pew saying, ‘They’re not meeting my needs’ and start saying, ‘Whose needs can I meet?’”*

“Then needs will be met. When the servant spirit flourishes in a congregation, then they minister to each other as unto the Lord.”

You see, somehow – someway – in even our churches today -- it’s become all about “Me!”

But, Paul describes another way – a way – admittedly – that seems impossible to comprehend – much less put into practice.

And, it certainly would be impossible – on our own!

But, what makes this way of life doable is the Holy Spirit living inside of us. You see, the Scripture says: *“... those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Rom. 8:14).*

In other words, the same Spirit that lived inside of Jesus Christ now lives in us – so that this “impossible” way Jesus lived, now becomes “possible” for us too!

We will, of course, stumble all our lives trying to get it right – learning from each success and even from each misstep along the way.

But, the point is...

And, the thing Paul really wants us to see...

Is that this is the only way that really matters...

Because Love is the only thing that endures in the end!

The other stuff?

Prophecy – tongues – knowledge – and whatever other Spiritual Gifts there are – they're temporary – at best!

They're special gifts of Grace from God to help us and build up the Church here and now.

But, when the Kingdom of God comes in its fullness...

When Jesus Christ returns – as He's promised...

Then, the picture's complete (so to speak) – and those things which only "pointed" to the Kingdom are no longer required because the Kingdom Itself has come!

That's what Paul means when he talks about becoming a man and putting childish ways behind him...

And, about now seeing only but a poor reflection – then seeing face to face...

And, about now knowing in part, then knowing fully...

It's all about the "temporary" giving way to the Eternal...

And, the things which "pass" to the only thing which truly Lasts...

Which is Love!

That's why Love's so important!

It's the very nature of God Himself! The Scriptures say: "*God is love*" (1 John 4:16).

Love is the only thing that endures. Everything else – all these Spiritual Gifts – are only little helps along the way.

But, to love and to be loved in Christ is the only thing that counts in the end!

And so, for the Corinthians – or anybody else – embracing their gifts while ignoring or overlooking the Love of Christ...

Is like a man standing on a train platform affectionately admiring his ticket...

While the train itself -- the thing the ticket is actually for – begins pulling away!

Noted scholar Tom Wright, shares a story about when the famous composer Mozart was a young man living in Vienna with his father, Leopold (who also happened to be a fine musician himself).

Well, as it turns out, apparently Mozart was sort of a prankster and was fond of playing a recurring trick on his father.

The younger Mozart would often come home late after spending a night carousing with friends – long after his father had gone to sleep.

And so, `ole Wolfgang would go to the piano and start to loudly play a scale of rising notes – one after the other – each note slower and louder as he reached the resolution at the top of the scale.

And then, Mozart would stop – one note short – and go to bed himself!

Well, as the story goes, Leopold would toss and turn in bed as the unfinished scale repeatedly played in his head. Apparently, the frustration of having his

musical senses aroused in such a fashion without resolution was too much to bear.

It drove him crazy!

And so, eventually the elder Mozart would throw off his covers – stagger downstairs – and play the last note himself!

Well, the exercise of Spiritual Gifts without being practiced in Love is like falling one note short on a scale!

It's incomplete!

Something else is needed...

One more note has to be played.

That note is Love – which binds all the rest together in perfect harmony!

Robertson McQuilkin served as the president of Columbia International University for 22 years.

Before that, he and his wife were missionaries in Japan.

Robertson is the author of numerous books, articles and is a well-known conference-speaker and lecturer. But, perhaps his greatest life's work isn't what he did...

But, what he gave up – for the sake of Love.

You see, right at the height of his tenure at Columbia International, Robertson's wife Muriel developed Alzheimer's.

The bright, articulate and creative woman she was – slowly began to give way to an encroaching darkness that clouded her mind.

And, when it became apparent that Muriel was in need of full-time care, Robertson resigned as President to stay home and care for his wife until she died in 2003.

He fed her...

Bathed her...

Loved her, even when the only thing she could respond with were indecipherable grunts and groans.

“Love takes the sting out of duty,” he said.

Of course, his decision wasn’t easy. And, it certainly wasn’t without controversy.

You see, Robertson was important to the University. Under his leadership the school flourished!

The University grew!

Thousands of missionaries were trained and sent out for service.

A lot of people depended on him.

So, his colleagues urged him to put Muriel in a nursing home so he could continue with – quote – unquote -- “God’s work.”

But, God’s work, Robertson said, was taking care of his wife.

“There are others who can lead the Bible college,” he said, *“But I am the only one who can take care of Muriel.”*

Well, I could probably tell you much more about Robertson McQuilkin and the decision he made -- really – give up everything to care for his wife.

But, I'd like to share it with you in his own words.

If you *youtube* his name you'll find the most amazing speech Robertson gave explaining his decision. You should look it up when you get home. I hope you do. It will bring tears to your eyes.

But, I want to share it now.

Robertson says – very simply:

“I haven't in my life experienced easy decision-making on major decisions, but one of the simplest and clearest decisions I've had to make is this one, because circumstances dictated it.

Muriel now, in the last couple of months, seems to be almost happy when with me, and almost never happy when not with me.

In fact, she seems to feel trapped, becomes very fearful, sometimes almost terror, and when she can't get to me there can be anger, ... she's in distress.

But when I'm with her, she happy and contented, and so I must be with her at all times ... and you see, it's not only that I promised in sickness and in health, 'till death do us part,' and I'm a man of my word.

But as I have said (I don't know with this group, but I've said publically) it's the only fair thing. She sacrificed for me for forty years to make my life possible...

So if I cared for her for forty years, I'd still be in debt. However, there's much more... It's not that I have to. It's that I get to.

I love her very dearly, and you can tell it's not easy to talk about.

She's a delight. And it's a great honor to care for such a wonderful person.”

And so, we're reminded...

“...Where there are prophecies, they will cease...”

“Where there are tongues, they will be stilled...”

“Where there is knowledge, it will pass away.”

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.”

“But the greatest of these is love.”

Amen.