

Bethel

Prayer Meeting Addresses

Number 40 Coveting the Best Gifts

Reading: 1 Corinthians 12. 27-31, 13. 1-13

27 Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.

28 And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.

29 Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles?

30 Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?

31 But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.

1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

4 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

8 Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

9 For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

10 But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

11 When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

12 For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

Address

At the end of chapter 12, Paul is speaking of the various gifts that there were at that time in the church of God. He mentions such things as the gift of healing, the gift of speaking with tongues, the gift of interpreting, and quite a few other gifts. And when he comes to the end, he says this: “But covet earnestly the best gifts” – and straight on into chapter 13. Do not forget, as originally given there were not these chapter divisions. They were devised in the Middle Ages, obviously to be a help to us in finding the place. But originally there was no division between chapter 12 and chapter 13. You see the simple point of the apostle: all these various gifts in the churches, *but* there is something more important. Covet that; “covet earnestly the best gifts.” And then he comes straight into it: *the love of Christ made known in our hearts*. That is the best gift and that is what we have to covet earnestly, not these other things. Be thankful for them, but do not covet them earnestly.

This word has remained with me, this coveting earnestly the best gifts. I am thinking of things like this: *a spirit of real prayer*. What a wonderful thing to possess it, to be able to pour out our hearts in prayer, to receive answers to our prayers, to know nearness to the Lord, gracious access. Covet earnestly these best gifts. Now that is something I am sure all of us could covet earnestly as led by the Spirit of God.

Now there may be times when something special is laid on your heart. I remember a few years ago, perhaps fifteen or twenty years ago, I preached from this text, “Covet earnestly the best gifts.” It was either New Year’s Day or it was the first Tuesday of the new year. I rather think I spoke of about four or five things, though I cannot remember them. But one unusual thing was laid on my spirit that day, and it was this. It seemed to lay hold of me, that in our public worship, the worship of God, we have the reading of the chapter. Often the minister can just read it casually and the people can hear it casually. I remember that day speaking of that, a special point: covet earnestly that when the Word of God is read in the sanctuary, it might be some help; it might be some profit. Do you know, beloved friends, in greater or less measure it has been like that with me ever since. There has been a complete change between just reading a chapter and reading it carefully and prayerfully, the chapter profitable as it is read publicly, and things striking me which I have never thought of before, and things having an effect.

So this is my point this evening: this earnestly coveting these best gifts. So many things I might speak on; I am just going to mention two. One is this: *a spirit of intercessory prayer*. By that I mean to have the cases of others in our families, in our congregation, laid weightily upon us and to be enabled to pour out our hearts, not just for ourselves, but for those whose cases we are bearing before the Lord. I have felt for many years what a wonderful thing to be blessed with that spirit of intercessory prayer. Some people in great measure have possessed it. It seemed they could ask the Lord almost for anything and get it. They could look on a person saved by grace and say, “Well, ‘for this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of Him.’” I think it would be a wonderful thing to be blessed with this spirit of intercession.

Of course, the great point is, it is a *secret* gift. I believe there are some people abundantly blessed with it, and they go through their life and much of the blessing in the church of God is in answer to their prayers, but no-one really knows, because that person cannot stand up and say, I was awake praying in the night; this is the answer to my prayer. We seek that spirit of intercessory prayer.

“Covet earnestly the best gifts.” And the second thing, the other thing that seemed to be with me: sometimes to ask for something where we feel to come short or we feel to be very deficient. I thought of this: *to be able to speak a word in season* to them that are weary and them that are out of the way, whether it is a loving reproof or a word of comfort or of sweet encouragement. So many of us feel, Well, how can I do it? Well, to covet earnestly something that we do not possess.

There is the well-known story that appeared in one of the old magazines. In a village there was a most evil man, a vicious and violent man, and he hated the truth and was willing to argue and even to become abusive to those that opposed him. He denied Scripture and denied everything. There was a poor, humble, trembling man and he was so concerned. He felt the Lord laid it on him he had to go and speak to this evil man. He was terrified. He said, “Lord, I cannot; I dare not.” The Lord showed him he must. He said, “Well, I don’t know how to reason. I can’t answer his arguments.” He felt he had to go and in going he felt dreadful. When he got there, the vicious man asked him what he wanted and began to oppose him, and said, “I don’t want any of your religion,” and so on, and the poor, trembling man was full of utter confusion and felt he had just made a fool of himself. He just muttered one or two stammering sentences, that he was concerned about him in love; and he could hardly stop crying, and he went away in utter distress and confusion. But that did the deed

under the Holy Spirit's working! That wicked man over the years had stood all the arguments used against him, but this came right home: this poor, humble man who is so concerned about someone like me. And that did the deed, and that broke the barrier, and that was the beginning.

Well, I have felt (and it is according to 1 Corinthians 12) that all those who fear the Lord, in greater or lesser measure, should pray for some little gift in some way or other in which they can be made a help and blessing in the church of God and to the Lord's honour and glory. But do not forget chapter 13, the "more excellent way," the love of Christ in your heart.

Now just a word about this: "Covet earnestly." The holy law of God says, "Thou shalt not covet." Why? Covetousness means people wanting things so badly that they just cannot settle, they cannot rest, they are swallowed up with that thing they are coveting, which they are wanting, which they must have. Now, says the Lord, look at that in a gospel sense. The same idea, the same thought, but lovingly and graciously: as the world covets, so covet the best gifts. And this word, *earnestly*. It is the mark of real religion. The world is earnest. If you see a football crowd, they are in earnest. They cannot get there quickly enough. When they come away, it is the one thing they are talking about. They are either sad because they have lost or they are overjoyed because they have won. But the earnestness in the world – and doesn't the world put us to shame!

May the Lord sanctify this word and bless it to us in our hearts: "*But covet earnestly the best gifts.*"

This address was given at Bethel Chapel, Luton, by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom, on Thursday, 8th May, 2008