

## PREFACE

The apostle Paul has spent considerable time and ink telling us that what Spirit-gifts we have as individual believers, and as a local *community* of believers in the body of Christ, all come from above and are not self-generated. First he tells us they have come from the Holy Spirit:

**Read 1 Corinthians 12:11.**

Then he says much the same thing about God Himself:

**Read 1 Corinthians 12:18.**

And he reinforced that more recently with v28: “And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets...”

The point is clear: Whatever Spirit-gift(s) we have, have been given us from above. We do not select what we personally have from a list of options, nor do we have any say in the distribution of gifts within the church. Yet Paul closes this dissertation with the enigmatic v31: “But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.” Even so, I believe we *can* make sense of this—and even draw some rather valuable insight.

## v31

*But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.*

While it is certainly true that the second sentence of this verse points us toward Chapter Thirteen’s treatise on love, I hope to make the case that it is also essential to understanding the *first* sentence in this last verse of Chapter Twelve.

Here, once again, Christian scholarship presents us a long list of different interpretations for this verse. I will not waste time itemizing them, but I will point out just one with which I do not agree, but is sufficiently common and certainly possible. For example, it is the interpretation to which John MacArthur subscribes.

The operative verb, (*zeloute*), translated “earnestly desire” in the NASB, can be either in the *indicative* mood or the *imperative* mood. That is, with the same spelling in the Greek it can indicate something that *is*, or it can express a command (e.g., “Do this”). If one interprets this verb in the indicative, it could be expressed, as does MacArthur, “But *you* earnestly desire the greater gifts.” That is, in the indicative Paul is accusing the Corinthians of desiring the more prominent, the flashier Spirit-gifts such as tongues. He then follows this up with (paraphrasing), “But I have a better idea for you.”

It is true that interpreting the verb this way (indicative) clears up some of the problems we have with this first sentence. Why would Paul be telling them to do something that seems to run counter to what he has been teaching? But we can easily hear him once again pointing out what the Corinthians are doing wrong. Most commentators, however, believe this verb should be interpreted in the imperative, meaning that Paul is indeed telling them to “earnestly desire the greater gifts.”

### *The Greater Gifts*

What is the effective difference between the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy or the gift of helps?

The first, tongues, is *self*-oriented; Paul writes in 14:2, 4, “One who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God... one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself.” Thus it is not without merit, not without profit for the individual, but it is just for him (or, of course, her), and no one else. It is to his *own* profit.

The gifts such as prophecy, teaching, or helps, however, are *other*-oriented; Paul writes in 14:3-4, “One who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation... one who prophesies edifies the church.” Thus it is a gift God intends more specifically to build up the body of Christ, not the one who has been given the gift.

The church in Corinth was not bereft of Spirit-gifts. To the contrary, Paul opened this letter with his estimation of their spiritual endowments.

### **Read 1 Corinthians 1:4-8.**

Nonetheless, just two sentences later he is pointing out their deficiencies—particularly in the area of divisions, or schisms within the body. And as we proceed through the letter we learn that, in sum, their priorities are all wrong. Though it is true they are well-gifted by the Spirit, they are placing too much importance on the flashier gifts such as speaking in tongues. But Paul says that the “greater” gifts, the higher gifts are not those that draw attention to the one with the gift, but instead *edify those who benefit from the use of that gift.*

But what does Paul mean by “earnestly desire” the greater gifts? I rarely do this, but the late commentator Albert Barnes ([published in 1847-85](#)) puts the explanation for this so well, that I prefer to read, rather than reword what he has written.

*Barnes:* This word, however, may be either in the indicative mood (ye do covet earnestly), or in the imperative, as in our translation. Doddridge contends that it should be rendered in the indicative mood, for he says it seems to be a contradiction that after the apostle had been showing that these gifts were not at their own option, and that they ought not to emulate the gifts of another, or aspire to superiority, to undo all again, and give them such contrary advice. The same view is given by Locke, and so Macknight. The Syriac renders it, "Because you are zealous of the best gifts, I will show to you a more excellent way." But there is no valid objection to the common translation in the imperative, and indeed the connection seems to demand it. Grotius renders it, "Pray to God that you may receive from him the best, that is, the most useful endowments."

The sense seems to be this, [Paul says,] "I have proved that all endowments in the church are produced by the Holy Spirit; and that he confers them as he pleases. I have been showing that no one should be proud or elated on account of extraordinary endowments; and that, on the other hand, no one should be depressed, or sad, or discontented, because he has a more humble rank. I have been endeavoring to repress and subdue the spirit of discontent, jealousy, and ambition; and to produce a willingness in all to occupy the station where God has placed you. But, I do not intend to deny that it is proper to desire the most useful endowments; that a man should wish to be brought under the influence of the Spirit, and qualified for eminent usefulness. I do not mean to say that it is wrong for a man to regard the higher gifts of the Spirit as valuable and desirable, if they may be obtained; nor that the spirit which seeks to excel in spiritual endowments and in usefulness, is improper.

["]Yet all cannot be apostles; all cannot be prophets. I would not have you, therefore, seek such offices, and manifest a spirit of ambition. I would seek to regulate the desire which I would not repress as improper; and in order to that, I would show you that, instead of aspiring to offices and extraordinary endowments which are beyond your grasp, there is a way, more truly valuable, that is open to you all, and where all may excel." Paul thus endeavors to give a practicable and feasible turn to the whole subject, and further to repress the longings of ambition and the contentions of strife, by exciting emulation to obtain that which was accessible to them all, and "which, just in the proportion in which it was obtained," would repress discontent, and strife, and ambition, and produce order, and peace, and contentedness with their endowments and their lot, the main thing which he was desirous of producing in this chapter.

[Barnes continues] This, therefore, is one of the “happy turns” in which the writings of Paul abounds. He did not denounce their zeal as wicked. He did not attempt at once to repress it. He did not say that it was wrong to desire high endowments. But he showed them an endowment which was more valuable than all the others; which was accessible to all; and which, if possessed, would make them contented, and produce the harmonious operation of all the parts of the church. That endowment was love.

David Garland follows up with,

The greater gifts are those that edify, encourage, and comfort others. No gift is worth anything, however, if its use is not motivated by love. Love is *not* a greater gift or a substitute for gifts. It is a fruit of the Spirit, and love must accompany the gifts, not replace them. Love is the framework in which all gifts, greater and lesser, must be used.

### *The Way*

*And I show you a still more excellent way.*

Christianity is far more than just a belief system; Christianity is “life in Christ”—that is, *a way of life*. The goal, the purpose in this way of life is not simply eternal life, as in life beyond the grave, but living in the here and now “eternal life *in Christ*.”

### **Read Romans 6:22-23.**

*Conzelmann:* Paul does not promise a way to the “spiritual gifts,” but one that leads beyond them; nor is it the way that leads to love, but love *is* the way, at the same time also the goal of the “pursuing” and the “striving for.”

When Paul writes, “But earnestly desire the greater gifts,” then follows that immediately with, “And I show you a still more excellent way,” he is making two, yet interconnected, essential points:

1. Our love for each other in the body of Christ is to permeate everything we do, everything we say, and every purpose we pursue. It is to be the “way” we live. It is to be the motive behind our use of every Spirit-gift we have.
2. To that end, love is to be the guide and measure, the engine by which we “earnestly desire the greater gifts.” *Lord, please grant to me gifts that will build up my brother, my sister. Grant to me gifts that will glorify You and Your Son. Give me gifts that point others to You, instead of me.*