

Jesus, Light of Love

1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13

by Michael G. Lilienthal

You body of Christ,

Through the pen of St. Paul, the Holy Spirit describes for us Jesus, and our relationship to him. Let us consider this morning how the Holy Spirit depicts this Jesus as **light of love**, and this means that he is the head of the body, of which we are all individually members, and therefore that he is the **source of all gifts**, and also that he is the single greatest treasure, the **highest to attain**.

I. Source of All Gifts

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” This is how we are introduced to this text. Paul has been writing in this letter about the nature of the body of the church, how “God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor. 12:24-26). And now he explains the spiritual meaning: we are members, body parts, of the body of Christ. In another of Paul’s letters the Holy Spirit caused him to write, “[Jesus Christ] is the head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18). Throughout his epistles Paul emphasizes the very same thing.

Jesus Christ is the head of the body, therefore, and functions much like the brain of that body. Now think: if the brain is healthy, what does it want for the different body parts to do? They should work in tandem, building up the body together, right? What

if the body parts conflict, though? There are medical conditions that cause such a thing. The body attacks itself, not doing as the healthy brain directs it, and it starts to fall apart and die. If this is the case, if a certain member of the church starts to cause it difficulty, “it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell” (Matt. 5:30). This is the right application of excommunication. If a member of the church starts to cause it harm, he should be addressed, as Jesus instructs, but if eventually he will not listen and change, the harmful person should be cast off, “let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17).

Let that be your last concern with what the *other* members of the church are doing. As they say in anger management, “I can’t control what *you* do; I can only control what *I* do.” Learn, therefore, what *you* can do for the good of the church, analyzing your own personal gifts, talents, treasures, and finding where they function in this great moving body of Christ. Look at the list of gifts that God has given the church:

“God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.” God, our Lord Jesus, is the mighty brain, keeping everything in order in the church, making sure that the preaching of the Gospel is present (as in the work of the apostles, prophets, and teachers), and that the necessary works of service are also present (in the form of miracles, healing, helping, administrating, and tongues). It is only natural that, under this headship, all these gifts would work together. Think of yourself in these terms: where do you fall on this list? I’m betting none of you are

apostles, probably none are prophets, but there are teachers. I doubt any of you are particularly gifted in miracles; it's just not a common gift anymore; but some of you are gifted in healing, some in helping (bearing up others in their work), some in administrating (keeping things in order, delegating, filing paperwork if needed), and some in tongues, or languages. What you have to realize about all these gifts is that they are funneled down from one almighty God. Notice, they are all "appointed" by "God." Is God divided? Will God appoint one thing for a certain purpose, and then appoint another thing to directly conflict with the other? *No*.

Your neighbors' gifts, therefore, were appointed by God for use in the church, in some way or another, for the *improvement* of the church. And your gifts were appointed for exactly the same thing. How are you using your gifts, then? Although they each may be doing something different, they all, if you are a Christian, should be pushing toward one unified goal, in accord with the one source of all these gifts. What does our one source, Jesus Christ, want? The ultimate purpose can be seen in this, "in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Hear what God's Word tells us, how before appointing any of these other gifts, before even apostles or prophets, God appointed his Son as the "apostle and high priest of our confession" (Heb. 3:1), "making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:9-10), "who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the

testimony given at the proper time. For this," says Paul, "For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle" (1 Tim. 2:4-7); "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (Luke 24:46-47). All our gifts, therefore, whatever they may be, whoever we may be, should be used for this one purpose of giving the Gospel, constantly, to create and sustain faith. Your gifts are given to you as a means whereby salvation can be had for many people.

In this way, think of Christ as more than just the head, the brain; he is also the heart, constantly *giving, giving, giving*, for on the cross his blood poured out onto the ground, so that that same blood can be transfused into us who were dead in sin. The blood from that constantly bleeding heart makes alive us hodgepodge body members: how could we do otherwise than work for his purpose?

II. Highest to Attain

So where are you on that list – "first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues"? Are all equal? Paul asks this, "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?" and so on. No, of course not. But notice that he places these into a hierarchy: therefore the Holy Spirit can urge us through Paul to "earnestly desire the higher gifts." Wait a minute; isn't it true that "godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Tim. 6:6, NKJV)? How can Paul contradict himself and say, "earnestly desire"?

This does not mean that he wants us to be ladder-climbers, or full of selfish ambition. This is a very different type of hierarchy than a corporate one, or one in

government. Climbing higher in these gifts is not done to get something, but as we'll see, to give something. The Holy Spirit writes with Paul his instrument the manual and purpose behind this, for Paul says, "I will show you a still more excellent way," that is, "I will show you the highest of all possible gifts. Then you will understand."

Look at the next list Paul gives, in chapter 13, of the gifts that one might have: "tongues," "prophetic powers," "understand all mysteries," "knowledge," "faith," to "give away all I have," to "deliver up my body to be burned." Where are you on this list? Some of them are the same as the previous one, "tongues," or languages, "prophetic powers." Are you particularly gifted in being able to "understand all mysteries" as they are revealed in Scripture? Do you just "get it"? Are you gifted in "knowledge," knowing more than the average bear in biblical facts and data? Do you have a stronger "faith" than others, "so as to remove mountains"? Are you particularly generous, "giv[ing] away all [you] have"? Or are you perfectly willing to be martyred for the Truth, "deliver[ing] up [your] body to be burned"? Any of these is a wondrous gift of God, but notice, Paul says, one thing *must* be found there. One thing *must* be present alongside all gifts in the church in order for any gifts to be of any use:

Love. "If I have not love," the Holy Spirit has caused Paul to say, "I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal." "If I have not love," he declares, "I am nothing." "If I have not love," once more, "I gain nothing." Love, ἀγάπη, must be there. Without love, your gifts are worthless, you are worthless, any possible gain or benefit is worthless. *All must have love.* It is all-important. Thankfully, God leads Paul to describe what this love must look like, in a list of fifteen descriptors: "Love..."

1. Is Patient; that is, when “evil strikes us, and our natural reaction would be resentment, indignation, anger, blows perhaps, then love steps in...keeps calm, endures, and does this continually no matter how long the offense may persist,”¹ always hoping to win that purpose of salvation for a needy soul.
2. Is Kind; which is the active side of patience, not just doing no harm, but in fact performing helpfully, doing good.
3. Does Not Envy; but is happy at the prosperity of others.
4. Does not Boast; the partner to not envying, in fact acting and speaking humbly.
5. Is Not Arrogant; expanding on not boasting, not only just acting and speaking humbly but in fact *thinking* humbly, *thinking*, “Maybe I could do better; maybe I should improve myself.”
6. Is Not Rude; but thoughtful: think of the rabbit Thumper from *Bambi*, “If you can't say something nice...don't say nothing at all.”² In short, have *tact*, and think before you speak.
7. Does Not Insist on Its Own Way; it is selfless, putting the needs of others above personal preference.
8. Is Not Irritable; receiving the opposite of love frequently, but nevertheless continuing in love.
9. Is Not Resentful; keeps no account book of all the wrongs someone has done to it.
10. Does Not Rejoice at Wrongdoing; but any wrong causes love great grief and even pain.
11. Rejoices with the Truth; for when the saving Gospel has sway, love sings with the angels and with God.
12. Bears All Things; never complaining that it has suffered too much, for it remembers that Christ suffered hell itself for it.
13. Believes All Things; putting the “best construction on everything,” first thinking good about fellow man’s intentions, and believing confidently all the Gospel promises spoken by God.
14. Hopes All Things; expecting God’s grace always to win out.
15. Endures All Things; even under constant abuse, it remains love.

You see, love is the motivator for the use of all other gifts. Love is the steering wheel for our gifts. Are you unsure how your other gifts should be used? Let love be your guide.

I’ll tell you what love is *not*: it is *not* a pretty word to hang on your wall at home – let

¹ Lenski 555.

² *Bambi*, directed by James Algar and Samuel Armstrong (1942; Disney).

love have *meaning*, as Paul defined it. And another thing love is *not*: it's *not* some ambiguous, disembodied concept that rules our lives; it's *not* to be defined by us and then placed up as our God. Love is a pattern. Specifically, it is patterned after its source: our love, our ἀγάπη, is to be patterned after God's ἀγάπη. What does his look like? This is how God loved the world: "he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Ἀγάπη is not a love that looks at something beautiful and loves it because of it. Ἀγάπη is a love that looks at something ugly and yet loves it, and it's not a feeling, it's motion: it's doing something, it's giving something. See, then, why Love is the greatest: For one, it "never ends." "As for prophecies...tongues...knowledge," all these things "will pass away" and "cease." Because right now, on this earth, we're incomplete. The Holy Spirit is working in us until all these gifts will be no longer necessary. What need will there be of prophecy when everyone can see the heavenly realities? What need will there be of healing when all are whole? What need will there be of tongues when all are singing together with the angels? We're not there yet. We're like children. We see the truth as a reflection, in the mirror of God's Word. But by holding to what he gave us, in faith striving to exercise our love, we will attain that highest height of Christ and come to adulthood, see God face-to-face, know fully.

So, we see, "faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." Why? "Through [Jesus Christ] we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand" (Rom. 5:2). And it is proved, "the righteous shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4). And hope? "[W]e ourselves...groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for

adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved" (Rom. 8:23-24). Faith and hope both ground us upon the cross of Christ, clothe us in his righteousness, and prepare us for the world to come. It is on the basis of them that we are saved. But what will happen when this world ends and we enter into the thing for which we hope, when we see face-to-face the one in whom we have faith? Both of these will transform from faith and hope into knowledge and rejoicing. But what will happen to love after the Last Day? Love is the only thing that will be left completely unchanged in the crossing from here to glory.

Put another way: Faith receives the grace of God. Hope looks forward excitedly to the good things it will receive. Faith and hope each await the time when they will be transformed. Faith receives. Hope expects to receive. Love gives. Love is not transformed, but it transforms. Faith and hope take the things that God gives, but "Love alone makes us like God."³ Love, exercised, makes faith and hope and love stronger, in ourselves and in others. St. John was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write,

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:7-12)

Amen.

³ Lenski 573.