

Humility First

1 Corinthians 12:11-31

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



When I was just going into middle school, we started attending a new church. Nothing bad had happened, we had moved, and now the drive to our previous church was too long. The church we started attending was an EFCA church that met in a YMCA. This was quite the change from the very traditional Presbyterian church we had been attending. Both were good churches, but they were very different. One of the big differences was the setting, a YMCA gymnasium versus a large sanctuary with dark wood and stained-glass windows from the mid-1800s. Meeting in a YMCA meant that we had to set up and tear down every single Sunday. Shortly after we got settled into our new church, my brother and I joined the setup team. This meant that we would show up early to set up and stay late to tear down. Many of our friends were on this team, so it was an easy way to spend more time with them. The Lord would use those years of being on the setup team to show me what true humble service looks like.

One of the main leaders for the setup team was the dad of one of our friends. He was kind, patient, and one of the most willing servants that I have ever met. He knew that his spiritual gift was shepherding, although you wouldn't find him counseling anyone; he cared for others through helping and serving. He never wanted to be upfront and would always remind us that we weren't just setting up chairs, we were preparing a place for God's people to worship. What a true shepherd and servant heart! I even remember one time when he explained to me that he would keep extra sets of tools to lend out so that he could joyfully serve anyone who asked. His thought went like this, "If I have extra tools, even if they aren't the best, I can lend them out and not worry if they get broken or don't get returned. My responsibility isn't to worry about getting my tools back; it is to be willing to help and serve others." How amazing! He went out of his way to spend his money so that he had extra for others. See, when we experience a servant like this, we understand the power and significance of serving. It isn't about a reward or attaining fame; it is about the joy that comes from willingly and freely serving someone else. It is an overflow of what we have experienced through Jesus. You can't fake this kind of serving because it requires genuine humility. That is something that the Corinthians needed, genuine humility. Their pride had driven them apart and distorted the reason for spiritual gifts. Paul wanted them to understand that **humility is to be the primary posture of a believer.**

1. A fruitful tension.

- a. How do we wrestle with this list?
 - i. Every gift is needed for health and effectiveness.
 - ii. Not every gift is the same.
 - iii. The goal is unity (mission and fellowship) and effectiveness (evangelism and discipleship).
- b. **Let's ask the question – Is Paul ranking the gifts? → Yes & No**
 - i. **Why, then, does Paul rank the first three? That is more difficult to answer; but it is almost certainly related to his own conviction as to the role these three ministries play in the church. It is not so much that one is more important than the other, nor that this is necessarily their order of authority, but that one has precedence over the other in the founding and building up of the local assembly.** In light of 14:17 and the probability that those who have taken the lead against Paul are considered “prophets,” one is tempted to see here a subordinating of such people to the apostle, who is giving them “the Lord’s command” (14:37) over against their “prophets.” It is perhaps noteworthy that none of these “ranked persons” is *addressed* in this letter, nor are they assumed to be “in charge” of the worship, which according to these texts is still under the sovereign authority of the Spirit.¹
 - ii. Here is a helpful explanation on the ordering or ranking of the gifts.
 1. **(1) First, apostles.** On this term see on 1:1 and 9:1–2. It is no surprise that Paul should list “apostles” first. The surprise is that they should be on this list at all, and that he should list them in the plural. As noted on 1:1, for Paul this is both a “functional” and “positional/official” term. In keeping with the other members on this list, it is primarily “functional” here, probably anticipating the concern for the “building up” of the body that he has already hinted at in v. 7 and will stress in chap. 14. Most likely with this word he is reflecting on his own ministry in this church;¹⁹ the plural is in deference to others who have had the same ministry in other churches. In any case, there is no other evidence that Paul thought of a local church as having some among it called “apostles,” who were responsible for its affairs.
 2. **(2) Second, prophets.** On this term see on vv. 12:8–10. The question is whether Paul is here thinking of a specific group of people known as “prophets” vis-à-vis “apostles” and other members of the community, or whether this is a purely functional term for him, referring to any and all who would exercise the gift of prophecy. The answer is probably Yes and No. As noted on v. 10, the evidence of chap. 14 suggests that all “Spirit people” were potentially “prophets,” in the sense that they could prophesy. But this list, as well as the similar kind of language in Eph. 2:20 and 4:11, suggests that for Paul, as for Luke, there were some who, because they regularly functioned in this way, were known as “prophets.” The term here is probably a designation for the latter, although the emphasis would still be on their *function*, namely to build up the community.
 3. **(3) Third, teachers.** This is the first mention of this ministry in the extant Pauline letters. All attempts to define this ministry from the Pauline perspective are less

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 619–622.

than convincing since the evidence is so meager. As with prophecy, the noun “teaching” will appear again as a gift (14:6, 26; q.v.) without concern for the person of the teacher. Probably the same relationship obtains between teaching (as an inspired utterance) and the teacher as between prophecy and the prophet. There were some who regularly gave a “teaching” in the communities, and thus came to be known as teachers. But again, as chap. 14 indicates, the concern here is with their *function*, not their office.

4. **(4, 5) Then, miracles; then, gifts of healings.** On these gifts see on vv. 12:8–10. It is of interest that these two appear in reverse order from vv. 9–10, thus suggesting the irrelevancy of rank from here on. As noted above, the emphasis is not on the people who have these gifts, but simply on the presence of the gifts themselves in the community.
 5. **(6) Helpful deeds.** This word occurs only here in the NT, although it is known in the LXX, where it functions as a verbal noun meaning to help, assist, or aid someone. Perhaps it is similar to the final three items in the list in Rom. 12:8 (service, giving to the needs of others, doing acts of mercy). In any case, it implies that some minister to the physical and spiritual needs of others in the community.
 6. **(7) Gifts of administration.** Although the cognate personal noun of this word occurs in Acts 27:11 and Rev. 18:17, meaning “steersman” or “pilot,” this noun occurs three times in the LXX,²⁷ where it carries the verbal idea of giving “guidance” to someone. Since the word “administration” in contemporary English conjures up the idea of “administrative skills,” which is a far cry from what Paul had in mind, the better translation here might be “acts of guidance,” although it is likely that it refers to giving wise counsel to the community as a whole, not simply to other individuals.
 7. **(8) Different kinds of tongues.** On this gift see on v. 10. As noted above, it is no surprise that it is listed last; what is unusual is that it stands rather by itself at the end of this list as a gift of utterance. It surely seems out of place after the preceding four items. This increases the probability that our interpretation is correct, that it is not at the bottom of a descending list but is finally included in a truly heterogeneous listing of gifts and ministries in the church.²
- iii. We have to remember that Paul is writing to a specific group in Corinth. So when we understand his ranking explanation, it is best to think descriptive and not prescriptive.
1. The other important thing is to remember that Paul is talking about gifts and not people.
 - a. One of the reasons that we can quickly dismiss that idea of ranking is that we don’t want to rank people. Paul is not ranking people. Paul is inviting us into a fruitful tension here when we are thinking about the gifts.
- c. **Pressing in on the body illustration.**
- i. Questions about essential function. → We can quickly dismiss the body illustration because we understand that there are parts of the body that are actually not “needed” for remaining alive.
 1. Can the body live without a heart? – No.

² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 619–622.

2. Can the body live without a brain? – No.
 - a. These are part of the vital organs.
3. Can the body live without a finger? – Yes.
4. Can the body live without the appendix? – Yes.
- ii. **Warning** – Pressing this too far can lead us to the same place as the Corinthians. Ignoring it though, seems to leave us with a weakness in the illustration that turns it into a nice idea and polite pleasantries instead of a motivational picture of unity and effectiveness.
- d. **Fruitful tension – Paul reminds us of a few things in this passage that are going to lead us into fruitful tension.**
 - i. **Gifts aren't for consumers – They are for servants.**
 1. Gifts are given for the building up of the church. We have talked about this as “mission and movement” not “buildings and programs.”
 - ii. **Effectively using my gifts requires my willing cooperation with the Holy Spirit.**
 1. Don't forget that the gifts are given by the Spirit. That means we are to cooperate with the Spirit in the usage of our gifts.
 - iii. **Humility must be the primary posture of any servant.**
 1. If your gift is given to you for your service, then humility must move us to use our gifts. Again, the problem of pride isn't just a them issue, it is something that we all struggle with.

2. Humility

- a. What is humility?
 - i. As the old saying goes, “It is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less often.”
 - ii. It is the virtue of having a rightsized perspective of yourself and being other-oriented.
- b. The difference between being humble and naïve.
 - i. When it comes to the body illustration and the understanding of spiritual gifts, we have three choices, pride or humility. Humility however, can actually be disguised as being naïve.
- c. **Pride** - Their pride has led them to disastrous realities that we have seen over and over again in the letter. Now, we come to learn with the spiritual gifts conversation that their pride drove them to overvalue and distort the gift of tongues.
- d. Humility and Spiritual Gifts
 - i. Walking into your posture as a servant is critical for every area and sector of your life.
- e. **What humility isn't. – Thinking less of myself.**
 - i. Too often we confuse humility and low self-esteem. This is also why we can have a difficult time distinguishing arrogance and confidence.
 - ii. Someone who is humble doesn't think less of themselves, they know who they are and often have a high level of introspection and confidence.
 1. The example of this in Ephesians is Paul. In 3:8, he says that he is the very least of the saints, not because he has no self-confidence or is lacking in self-worth, but because he is aware of the goodness of God and his salvation.
 2. Nor is this a false humility. Paul truly understands his position and is a position of deep gratitude to God for all that he has done.

- f. **What humility is. – Thinking of myself less often.** ³
- i. **Dictionary** - the quality of having a modest view of one's value or importance
 - ii. This is a famous way of talking about humility that comes from C.S. Lewis in his book, *Mere Christianity*.
 - iii. How do I think of myself less often without thinking less of myself?
 1. This is the challenge of humility because we are so predisposed to think of ourselves first.
 - iv. Ultimately, humility is a profoundly loving act. → Why?
 1. It speaks of the value of another person that you or I wouldn't demand our way instead, listen and care for them.
 - a. **Caution** – Humility doesn't excuse or enable living in our disordered desires.
 - b. **Remember – The Bible gives us a better vision for life, time and time again. It does that two ways:**
 - i. Positive encouragement – Sections that positively teach this better vision for life.
 - ii. Characters that show us the consequences of not living in the framework God has provided for life.
- g. **How is humility lived out?**
- i. **A rightsized perspective of yourself.**
 1. Received or achieved identity? → This distinction will determine the size of your perspective on yourself.
 - a. If you operate with an achieved identity, you have to compare yourself to others. This means your worth and value is only in relationship to others around you. This posture of comparison routinely leads us away from joy and contentment.
 - b. If you operate with a received identity, your value and worth come from someone who esteems you greatly. In Christianity, that is God. This means your identity is both stable and rightsized through God's Word.
 2. It is really hard to think of yourself less often if you only ever think of yourself.
 - a. When we have a rightsized perspective we operate in confidence, security, and sensitivity for others.
 - ii. **Concern & sensitivity for others.**
 1. **Have you ever been in the grocery store, at a game, or in class and you were so focused on what it was that you were doing that you missed someone or something right in front of you? This is what happens when we focus on ourselves, we can't see others around us.**
 2. When we operate in humility, we grow in our concern and sensitivity for others.
 - iii. **Purposeful responsiveness.**
 1. The natural outflow of seeing the needs of others is to purposely respond to them.
 2. We can't forget, purposeful responsiveness is not about responding to every possible need, but it is about responding intentionally with our time, talents, and treasure for the good of others and the glory of God.

³ In the words of an oft-quoted paraphrase of C. S. Lewis' observations in *Mere Christianity*:

"Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it's thinking of yourself less." via Richard Coekin, *Ephesians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God's Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2015), 114.

h. Humility and Spiritual Gifts.

i. My gift is important as one part of other important gifts.

1. This is where the body illustration is particularly helpful. It reminds us that we are one part of a much greater thing. Your gift is needed, after all, it was given to you by God and for a purpose. But, your gift isn't the only gift.

ii. My focus is on being a servant and glorifying Jesus.

1. Why do you use your gift? The only appropriate answer is to glorify Jesus. The Spirit glorifies the Son in all that he does, and by giving you a gift, the Spirit desires for the Son to be glorified through your gift.

iii. Not all the gifts carry the same weight.

1. Understanding this doesn't mean that all the gifts aren't important, it does mean that in the economy of the kingdom, there are some gifts that carry a greater weight.

3. Your SHAPE

a. How am I using it? → S.H.A.P.E. ⁴

- i. **S** = Spiritual Gift (Which gift resonates with you?)
- ii. **H** – Heart (What stirs your emotions, positively/negatively?)
- iii. **A** = Abilities (What could you teach a class on? What is your occupation? What special skills do you have? Etc.)
- iv. **P** = Personality (Are you an introvert/extrovert? Prefer church people or non-believers?)
- v. **E** = Experiences (What tough things have you been through? What have you seen? Where have you been? What have you done? Etc.)

b. What's my gift?

- i. Often, I am helped to understand my gift by understanding what isn't my gift. When I (Kyle) look at the gifts I can clearly discern that I do not have the gifts of evangelist, shepherd, or teacher. Partially, because I know myself. And partially, because of what others have affirmed in me.
- ii. What is your gift?
 1. What resonates with you? What do you find yourself naturally doing.
 2. Pastor Brent likes to encourage that instead of thinking of this as a list we should think of it as a framework. We are able to do all of them, but we are given unique abilities by God in a certain direction.
 3. A framework also helps us in understanding how to utilize our gift, because it doesn't just ask what it is, but considers the whole person.

c. Two key questions:

i. Do I intentionally watch for the movement of God around me so I can join him in what he's doing?

1. This question is not only about dependency on the Spirit through the day, but the active watching and looking for the opportunities of the Spirit.
2. Remember, Paul tells us in 12:11 that the Spirit gives the gifts out according to his will. This teaches us that the Spirit of God is not just some cosmic force that we are trying harness or tune into. He is God, has a will, and divine purposes. Do I ask and look for the Spirit of God to move and guide me throughout my day?

⁴ Pastor Brent talks about this in detail in the Discipleship 301 class.

ii. **Do I find myself responding more and more quickly to the Spirit's promptings throughout my day?**

1. This question builds on the previous one. Once I begin looking for God's Spirit to move and direct me through my day, am I increasing in my sensitivity to his leading? That is, how long does it take me to recognize the Spirit's leading and when I do, how long do I respond in obedience?
- iii. The reason we ask these questions is not to heap spiritual guilt. It is to increasingly follow Jesus in a life-defining way and participate in the joy of our salvation.

Note on the APEST gift list:

- **Apostle** – Pioneer, entrepreneur, visionary – (*Peter, Paul, John, Priscilla & Aquilla*)
 - **Description:** Apostles extend the gospel and plant churches. They ensure that the faith is transmitted from one context to another and from one generation to the next. They are always pushing into new territory, thinking about the future, bridging barriers, establishing the church in new contexts, developing leaders, networking trans-locally, and coming up with new and innovative means to do kingdom work.
 - **Pitfalls of immature apostles: "Bulldozer." If apostles focus solely on initiating new ideas and rapid expansion, they can leave people and organizations wounded or uncared for.** Apostles typically welcome change and risk much more than most and can run too fast or too far ahead of the flock, leaving them behind or leaving a mess in their wake.
 - They are unable to discern the constant flood of good and innovative ideas *they* have from the God-ideas that are being *given to* them. They try out something new every week, never really developing any of their ideas, and jumping from thing to thing to thing. After a while, people stop following them because they have a hard time staying focused on the task at hand, and people refuse to give their time and energy to something they know could change at any moment.
 - **What they need from the other gifts:** The shepherding and teaching functions are needed to ensure people are cared for and developed/discipled rather than used or dragged along behind the boat. The prophet function is needed to ensure we are hearing from God and not acting in our own strength. The evangelist function is needed to apply the macro part of the mission to sharing the gospel with individual people and inviting them to respond.
- **Prophet** – Preaching, gives clarity to truth, calls to obedience – (*Isaiah, Jeremiah, Anna*)
 - **Description:** Prophets know God's will. They prioritize listening to God. They are particularly attuned to God and his truth for today and are zealous for the holiness of God. They question and question the status quo, bringing correction and challenging the dominant assumptions we inherit from the culture, insisting the community obey what God has commanded.
 - **Pitfalls of immature prophets: "Jerk." Immature prophets assume they are always right. The problem is that often times they are right, and this builds a false sense of confidence that they get it right 100% of the time.** Because of this, they can become arrogant or unwilling to listen. In contrast, a mature prophet is actually quite humble because they know that any revelation they receive isn't their own and they entrust it to the community. Without the other types of leaders in place, prophets can be perceived as complainers or belligerent activists and unable to be tactful when delivering a message. They also spend significant time disengaged from others in an attempt to hear the voice of God. This may cause them to be disconnected from everyday realities and can become otherworldly, unable to identify with others.

- **What they need from the other gifts:** The apostle and evangelist functions are needed to ensure the church does not become inward-focused or unable to move. The shepherding and teaching functions are needed to ensure that truth is applied and people are compassionately led toward growth and obedience, rather than feeling scorned or barked at.
- **Evangelist** – Sharing the gospel & conversations with non-Christians – (*Philip*)
 - **Description:** These infectious communicators of the gospel message recruit others to the cause. They call for a personal response to God's redemption in Christ and also draw believers to engage the wider mission, growing the church. They have insight into how to articulate and relate the gospel to unbelievers, and enjoy spending time with non-Christians, often reminding other Christians that there are non-Christians still out there in the world. They may be people-gatherers, and wherever they go they seem to draw others into discussion about Jesus. They are not timid about their faith and seem to easily share with others regularly.
 - **Pitfalls of immature evangelists:** “Celebrity.” **They may present a narrow gospel that is all about getting people out of hell. While important, this doesn’t include the broader message of Jesus’ invitation to discipleship and the Kingdom that He came to inaugurate which was central to His Gospel.** When they do this, they make faith and Christianity all about the afterlife and little to do with life transformation in the present life time. Oftentimes, once an individual accepts the message and receives Christ, they make the world's fastest baton pass to the local church or a small group and are never heard from again. They move on to the next person. This can be a jarring experience for someone who is just entering a discipling relationship. Evangelists can also be so focused on reaching those outside the church that maturing and strengthening those inside is neglected.
 - **What they need from the other gifts:** The shepherding and prophet functions are needed to ensure the church does not neglect the growth, maturity, and care for those inside the church. The teaching function is needed to help explain the gospel, helping people to understand, and to disciple new believers toward maturity. The apostle function is needed see the big picture of the mission and help keep the church moving forward.
- **Shepherd** – Care, counsel, empathy, and concern – (*Barnabas, James*)
 - **Description:** Shepherds nurture and protect with a tender heart. As caregivers of the community, they focus on the protection and spiritual maturity of God's flock. They cultivate a loving and spiritually mature network of relationships while making and developing disciples. They tend to spend most of their time with other Christians and can easily empathize with others, often exhibiting lots of patience with those in need. They see needs, provide comfort, and encourage others. They get burdened by others’ problems and have a knack for speaking the truth in love. They are good listeners and are easy to talk to and share deep feelings with.
 - **Pitfalls of an immature shepherd:** **Shepherds like to be with people in the midst of their brokenness, pain and suffering. However, they can have a really difficult time in moving people from that stage to one where they are seeking healing, transformation, and redemption.** Immature shepherds sometimes don't have the confidence to challenge people to move forward for fear that the person will be angry with them. The mature shepherd can live in this tension while the immature shepherd stays a mile away from it and will let people sit in their brokenness far longer than they should. Immature shepherds may also value stability and the company of believers to the detriment of moving the mission forward.
 - **What they need from the other gifts:** The apostle and evangelist functions are necessary to keep a forward momentum. The prophet function is needed to ensure that truth is being spoken and people are called to repentance, even when it is hard. The teaching function is needed to help explain and apply the truth of Scripture, giving a guide for growth and healing.
- **Teacher** – Those who explain tough concepts – (*Apollos, Philip*)

- **Description:** They enjoy spending time studying and reflecting on the Scriptures seeking understanding so they can pass on their insights to others. They get excited about discovering hidden treasures within the text taking others into a deeper understanding. As communicators of God's truth and wisdom, they help others remain biblically grounded to better discern God's will. They encourage the community to remain faithful to Christ's Word and help others transition from having head knowledge to application. They are passionate about taking difficult passages and explaining them in a clear and understandable fashion.
- **Mature teachers enjoy: Pitfalls of an immature teacher: "Pharisee." Scripture can be the end rather than the means to a relationship with God and neighbor.** They can idolize Scripture and put it over intimacy with the living and breathing God. They may value head knowledge over life transformation leaving learners stunted in development. The focus becomes "knowing" rather than "doing." They can fall into only thinking abstractly about difficult concepts without incarnating it into everyday life. Immature teachers can selfishly pursue impressing others for their knowledge rather than crediting the authority that is given from Scripture and the Holy Spirit. They may erroneously be motivated by showing others how much they know.
- **What they need from the other gifts: The shepherding function is needed to be sure that the truth of Scripture is applied to people's hearts and is used as a tool for growth and relationship, not just knowledge.** The prophet function helps the community to hear from the Spirit through Scripture, rather than approaching it like a book of knowledge or history. The apostle and evangelist functions are needed to ensure that the gospel is going forward and people are being challenged to respond to Jesus and move forward on mission.
- **The goal of the Christian life is to glorify God. We glorify God when we grow into maturity.**
 - What is done for the saints, and by the saints, is *for building up the body of Christ*. The word *oikodomē* has been used in 2:21, but here it has a broader meaning. The church is increased and built up, and its members edified, as each member uses his or her particular gifts as the Lord of the church ordains, and thus gives spiritual service to fellow members and to the head. Because of its applied meaning the use of *oikodomē* with *the body* does not necessarily involve confusion of metaphors, but because of what he wishes to say now about the growth and unity of the church, the apostle finds the metaphor of the body more adequate than any other.⁵

⁵ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 127.