

Maturity and Community

1 Corinthians 14:1-25

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Do you remember when you were in kindergarten or first grade, what your answer was to the question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Mine was, “A cowboy.” As a kid growing up in the city, that was quite the dream! And most kids have no shortage of imagination on this topic. Every adult around me was probably thinking through the logistics of what it would take for me to realize that dream. Children are remarkable in this way. A dream that is so big to everyone else is perfectly normal to them. I also find it so interesting how much time children give to focusing on being and getting older. In their play, they play games about being older. In our questions, we ask them about what they want to be when they grow up. And even in their statements, they talk about how big they are. In the most positive sense, the goal of childhood is not to stay a child but to grow up. See, the Bible routinely talks about children. About how they are valuable to the kingdom and how we are to have faith like a child (Matt. 18:2-4). It talks about how we are to grow up and grow into maturity by putting away childish things (1 Cor. 13:11). Again, every child that we interact with does not have the goal of remaining a child. They want to grow up. There is something in that for us to consider. ... Do I want to grow up?

If someone asked you what you hoped to experience in your journey of following Jesus, what would your answer be? Experience and know that God loves you? That is a good and worthwhile thing. Do good things and love others around you? That is noble and God-honoring. Do what is right and honor God in the way you live? That is significant and at the heart of Scripture. But what about growing into a mature believer who resembles Jesus? See, God really has one goal for you and me, conformity with his Son, Jesus (Rom. 8:29). It doesn't take long to scan the pages of the Bible to hear that God desires us to grow into maturity. Is maturity our goal?

Maturity is not a secondary thought for Paul or in the Bible. It is primary and essential, and it is what following Jesus in a life-defining way is all about. Just as children want to grow up, so should we. **The goal is to grow in maturity and give God glory.**

1. The Corinthian Problem (context)

- a. Pride – This has been the problem all along and continues to be.
 - i. Paul has been addressing the pride problem and all of its various manifestations since chapter 1.
 - 1. What then is the problem? A careful reading of 1:10–4:21 indicates that at least four issues are involved: (1) There is “quarreling” and “divisiveness” among them, with their various teachers as rallying points. That this is so is indicated by explicit statements in 1:10–12, 3:3–4, and 3:21, plus indirect statements in 3:5–9 and 4:1–2 as to how they should regard these teachers. However, there is not the slightest hint that the teachers were themselves party to this quarreling; indeed, Paul’s affirmations of Apollos in 3:5–9 and 16:12 indicate the very opposite.⁸
 - 2. **The ideal of the Corinthian was the reckless development of the individual. The merchant who made his gain by all and every means, the man of pleasure surrendering himself to every lust, the athlete steeled to every bodily exercise and proud in his physical strength, are the true Corinthian types: in a word, the man who recognized no superior and no law but his own desires.**¹
 - ii. The pride problem in this section is the public demonstration of two spiritual gifts, tongues and prophecy.
 - 1. On chapters 12-15: Together, these four chapters bring the letter, with all of its preceding arguments, to a fitting climax. Being “spiritual” in the present means to edify the community in worship (chaps. 12–14), for the perfect has not yet come (13:8–13); and when it does come, it will include the resurrection of the body, albeit as a “spiritual body” (chap. 15).²
 - 2. Paul has dealt with the variety of spiritual gifts and the essential unity in the body of Christ of those who have them. He has shown that love is pre-eminent; it stands above all else. Now he concentrates on two of the gifts, ‘tongues’ and prophecy, and the length of his treatment shows the importance of the subject to his readers. From the way the apostle writes, it is not unreasonable to deduce that there were some in Corinth who held that ‘tongues’ was the more important, perhaps even that those who spoke in ‘tongues’ were superior Christians. Paul is at pains to make it clear that the exercise of this gift is legitimate. It can be a mark of spiritual fervor, and in any case, every gift of God is good and is to be used. But at the same time, he curbs the exaggerated regard some of the Corinthians had for it. He steadily insists that the gift of prophecy is much to be preferred. Following on his demonstration of the importance of love, Paul insists that edification must be the prime consideration. Does one’s gift help other people? That is the important thing.³
 - iii. **Their goal wasn’t God’s glory or the church’s maturity, but public recognition.**

¹ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 22.

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), 570.

³ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 183.

1. The use of the spiritual gifts had become distorted to the point of proving one's superior spirituality. And the worship service became chaotic and uncontrolled. In the end, the Corinthian worship services looked more and more like the chaotic temple worship of Pagan Corinth. Paul's concern in this area is significant. He understands the risk that is present. Not only are believers not being built up into maturity, but non-believers are walking in and not seeing a discernible difference in worship. Even worse yet, they aren't hearing the gospel and all of its life-changing good news! Paul knows that this cannot continue.
2. "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy" (**14:1**). This is one of three exhortations to pursue prophecy in 1 Corinthians (12:31; **14:39**), and similar instructions occur in two of Paul's other letters (Romans 12:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:19–21).⁴
3. Paul's purpose in this chapter is to commend the gift of prophecy, and particularly to commend it as more useful in public contexts than the gift of languages. By all accounts, the Corinthians were obsessed with languages—it is hard to make sense of **14:1–25** otherwise—and Paul wants to reorder their preferences so that they prioritize prophecy above languages. In the opening paragraph, he presents two contrasts to show them why they should. He will expand on both as the chapter continues.⁵
 - a. 1 Cor 13 – Love and the power of the more excellent way.
 - i. This leads right into chapter 14 and their approach to public worship and honoring one another in the public setting.

2. Prophecy & Tongues

- a. What are they?
 - i. It is important for us to take a few minutes to define the terms in this passage. There has been much confusion about these two gifts, especially in the Western church over the past 100 years.
- b. **Tongues** – two types: Prayer & spoken language.
 - i. When the NT talks about tongues, it is referring to two different types of languages. That is why the gift of tongues is often called the gift of languages in modern theology.
 1. The first type is that of spoken and understood languages. – We see this most prominently in Acts 2. At Pentecost, the disciples were speaking in all sorts of languages that they didn't naturally or natively speak. Yet, as the nations were all present, those gathered around the disciples heard their language being spoken. While the speaker didn't understand what they were speaking, the listener understood it precisely.
 2. The second type is that of a prayer language. – This is most likely what Paul is referring to in this passage. It is a language that only God understands, and so in Paul's mind, it is only profitable to do in private. Why? It is just babble in the public setting with no translator.
 - ii. **Important** – Paul doesn't forbid tongues.

⁴ Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God's Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2021), 149.

⁵ Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God's Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2021), 151–152.

1. For all this, Paul loves speaking in languages privately: “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you” (v 18). It is a gift of the Spirit; it edifies him; it expresses prayer and thanksgiving to God; and it may even articulate the wordless prayers of the Spirit that Paul talks about elsewhere (Romans 8:26–27). Nevertheless, when we are gathered together as a church, it is better to speak five words that other people can make sense of and profit from than ten thousand words that they can’t (1 Corinthians 14:19). Love for others, as we have seen so many times in this letter, trumps my right to express myself.⁶
- c. **Prophecy** – A spiritual gift that is used for the upbuilding of the church into maturity.
- i. Prophecy, unlike tongue-speaking, involves speaking “to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort” (v 3). When we prophesy, we are directing our speech towards other human beings, who can understand us and be strengthened by what we are saying. Whoever speaks in tongues, on the other hand, “does not speak to people but to God” (v 2). This might be because all tongue-speaking is directed to God (like prayer) rather than to people (like prophecy); or it might be because people cannot understand the language, whereas God can. Either way, when people speak in tongues without interpretation, “no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit”. What you don’t understand is unlikely to make you stronger. That makes prophecy a more useful gift for public gatherings.⁷
 - ii.
 - iii. The rest of the chapter fills out the picture. Prophecy is spoken of as “revelation” (14:6, 26, 30), which has the capacity to convict unbelievers of sin (v 24) and lay bare the secrets of their hearts, so that they recognize the presence of God among the church (v 25). It exists so that the church may be built up (v 26). It must be weighed by others (v 29), which is not surprising given that we already know that it is partial rather than perfect (13:9). It can be spontaneous but need not be (14:30). And it is something which all of us should pursue (v 1, 39), even though ultimately it is not given to everyone (12:10, 28–29). In an excellent definition, which is often quoted in commentaries on this passage, Anthony Thiselton summarizes it like this:
 - iv. **“Prophecy, as a gift of the Holy Spirit, combines pastoral insight into the needs of persons, communities, and situations with the ability to address these with a God-given utterance or longer discourse (whether unprompted or prepared with judgment, decision and rational reflection) leading to challenge or comfort, judgment, or consolation, but ultimately building up the addressees ... While the speaker believes that such utterances or discourses come from the Holy Spirit, mistakes can be made, and since believers, including ministers or prophets, remain humanly fallible, claims to prophecy must be weighed and tested.”**⁸
- d. When we look at Paul’s counsel in this area, it should drive home a point that he has been making since the very beginning of the letter... You are to grow mature in Christ Jesus.
- i. Another way of saying it, maturity is the goal of the believer.

⁶ Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2021), 156.

⁷ Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2021), 152.

⁸ *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, page 965; see also David Garland, *1 Corinthians*, page 583; Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, page 581. via Andrew Wilson, *1 Corinthians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2021), 153.

3. The Goal

- a. Maturity and God's glory.
 - i. This message should come as a surprise to us; Paul has been saying it all along.
 - 1. Let's go back to two key points in the text so far.
 - ii. Melodic line – 1:2 – You are to be increasingly like Jesus.
 - 1. Remember this verse? It has taught us about our identity in Christ and the implications of what life is supposed to look like now that we are in Christ.
 - 2. **The Church exists because of Christ, and for Christ. – A doxological view.**
 - a. **The church exists to worship God. I.e., Give him glory. But it can only do this because of what God has done to establish the church.**
 - b. **“The main and most glorious purpose of any person's life is the whole-hearted worship of God.”**
 - iii. Whatever you do... - 10:31
 - 1. A particular quality of holiness is expected of the people of God. God had always expected Israel to be pure, or sanctified. As Christ's bride the church must also be holy: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:25–27).⁹
 - 2. **This means that the church and its people** certainly didn't exist to resemble the normal values of Corinth! Nor do we exist today to resemble the normal values of Ames or America. We are to look like Christ and operate as his kingdom people.
- b. Paul makes two statements in this section.
 - i. **“Build up the church”** – vv. 3,4,12
 - 1. Maturity is not optional in Paul's mind. Again, this is not new news to us in this letter.
 - 2. This is an idea that we have talked about throughout the 1 Corinthians series. Paul expects the Corinthians and all believers to walk and grow in maturity. This goes all the way back to 1 Cor. 1:2, when Paul uses the word, sanctified. It means an ongoing and increasing conformity to Christ. i.e., Growing in maturity.
 - 3. Here are three important reminders when it comes to maturity.
 - a. **Maturity takes time.** – It doesn't happen overnight.
 - b. **Maturity requires willing cooperation.** – It isn't going to be accidental. You actually have to cooperate with the Spirit of God for growth and maturity.
 - c. **Maturity needs others.** – The whole context of the letter has been to believers in community. We don't grow very well without other people, specifically other mature believers.
 - 4. Pride is evidence of immaturity.
 - a. If love is about mature and generous service. Pride is an expression of immaturity. They were immature and prideful... remember the whole “spiritual milk” comment from Paul back in chapter 3? Their lack of love and presence of pride is only more evidence of their immaturity.

⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 959.

ii. **Worship God (Give God glory)** – vv. 25

1. Worship is when we ascribe worth to something or someone. When something is worthy, it has inherent glory.
2. The effect of prophecy is different. This time Paul uses the singular for *unbeliever* and for ‘inquirer’ (he employed the plural in v. 23), but the change is not significant, unless he is suggesting that conversion is always an individual matter. The effect of a display of prophecy on an outsider is given in striking terms. Prophecy conveys a divine message (see on 12:10), and this will have powerful effects. *Convinced (elenchetai)* means ‘convicted’; it is used of the Holy Spirit’s work of convicting the world of sin (John 16:8). The divine word comes to the non-Christian with convicting power. For *judged (anakrinetai)* see on 2:14. The effect of the prophetic word is to reveal to the man his state. His whole inner being is searched out. Those things he fondly imagined to be hidden in *his heart* he finds reproved and judged, and he can ascribe this only to the activity of God. The result of prophecy is that he comes to *worship God*, recognizing that God is present in his church. Prophecy leads him to God.¹⁰
3. Gordon Fee notes, “Along with the great need for local communities to be edified, the reason set forth in this paragraph ought to be sufficient to lead the church to pray for the renewal of the prophetic gift in its ongoing life. It is not simply the presence of prophecy itself that signifies God’s presence among his gathered people, but the powerful revealing work of the Spirit that convicts of sin and leads to repentance. Perhaps in our domestication of the Spirit, we have also settled for a “safer” expression of worship, one in which very few are ever led to exclaim that “Surely God is among you.” Seeing that actually take place leads to prayer that v. 1 might be the church’s ongoing portion: love, spiritual gifts, especially prophecy.”¹¹

4. The big question of our lives.

- a. This passage is most directly about the public worship problems within the Corinthian context. So, how do we apply it to our lives?
 - i. First, if our worship services ever began to look like theirs, we too should heed Paul’s advice about the purpose of the gathered assembly.
 - ii. Second, we need to ask ourselves the questions of maturity and glory.
 1. Am I actively and intentionally growing mature in Christ Jesus?
 2. Is my life lived in such a way that others see me giving glory to God, and they are moved to proclaim that God is real and present?
 - iii. Here is how one theologian sums up this passage: “We see from this text that spiritual experience is not self-authenticating; one cannot defend a spiritual practice in church simply because we find it enthralling or exciting. Another way to put it is that spiritual maturity is not self-absorbed. The real mark of spiritual growth is concern for others, such that believers should pursue what will edify others. The emphasis on the mind and

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 189–190.

¹¹ 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), 687–688.

understanding is remarkable. According to Paul, edification comes with instruction and via the mind. When the church is gathered, then, attention must be given not just to form, but especially to content. Form without content, experience without understanding, does not build others up. Paul prefers prophecy and teaching, since both of these gifts communicate truth. Growth in the church derives from truth; thus, the church must strive to hear the truth when assembled.”¹²

1. Prophecy continues to be preferred over tongues because it strengthens people’s faith and can even lead to faith. Edification and the strengthening of believers are closely tied to order. The gifts are not to be used willy-nilly whenever people feel they are being guided by the Spirit. The number of gifts exercised when the church meets should be limited, and only one person should speak at a time. Similarly, the church should not be disrupted, as some wives were apparently doing, by asking questions. Edification does not come through a cacophony of sounds but via the understanding. The gifts are given not for self-expression but to build up others.¹³

b. Is my life a billboard for God’s glory?

i. Do I actively remember to whom I belong?

1. When I walk into any and every setting, do I remember that I belong to Jesus as his redeemed child?
 - a. Parents often remind their children of the fact that they belong to a family and that they are to live out the family values everywhere they go. The same is true for our faith.

ii. Do I actively remember what I represent?

1. The second question naturally flows from the first: if I belong to someone or something, then I represent that thing as well.
 2. Remember – Paul will go on to tell the Corinthian church that they are ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20).
 - a. “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.”
 - b. Do I regularly think about the fact that God wants to make his life-saving appeal through me?
 - c. Do I intentionally consider that as an ambassador, I am only supposed to represent the values of the one I represent, Jesus?
- iii. What is really interesting is that when we begin to truly let the Spirit of God lead us in these areas and questions, it not only transforms the way we see others, but it transforms the way we see obedience and faithfulness. Our lives take on the perspective of Paul, we are to give God glory in all things. And this giving God glory in all things is our spiritual act of worship. And as we worship God in this way, the spiritually seeking and searching will see that God is real, and they will be moved to also give God glory.

¹² Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 290.

¹³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 300.