

Title: Mr. Big Shot

Text: 1 Corinthians 13.2

Theme: Love trumps knowledge

Series: 1 Corinthians #66

Prop Stmt. It doesn't matter to God how great a leader I may be if I don't love.

Read Text:

Last Sunday night, the Colts and the Patriots played a tough football game for the right to go to this year's Super Bowl. This was a game that featured two of the biggest quarterbacks in the league. Peyton Manning and Michigan's Tom Brady were both known for their ability to stay cool under pressure and to be able to lead their teams down the field in the closing minutes of a gridiron contest for the final game-winning score. These two men are their team's "go-to-guys." For the Pistons, it is Chauncy Billups – "Mr. Big-Shot." But this position goes way beyond sports. Every business needs people like this. Every corporation needs a leader like this at the helm. Every military group, company, platoon, squadron or unit needs a leader, a point-person, the one who's knowledge and skill commands respect and inspires confidence and resolve.

We love to be around people like this. They always seem to know what to do. They see what others miss. They are able to make sense of that which is confusing to others. They find solutions to problems and ways around obstacles. They breathe hope and inspire confidence with their "we can do this" attitude. Corporations will pay obscene amounts of money to find and keep leaders like this because they recognize the immense value a person like this brings to the organization.

1 Corinthians 13.2 describes the ultimate "go-to-guy" or Mr. Big Shot for the church. (at least as most of us are tempted to see him) This person appears to us to be an incredible and irreplaceable asset. His ability to foresee issues and problems is uncanny and he is able to tell us how we ought to proceed with decisions that the congregation must make. He is able to unravel and then explain the deepest mysteries of theology and make sense out of perplexing passages and confusing texts. His confidence in his own God-given sense of what is right and wrong is so strong and unwavering that people line up behind him without hesitation and will obey his orders without question because this guy has always been able to do what others thought was impossible. Stories of his past accomplishments are told and re-told with a breathless and wide-eyed, legend-like aura about them. So, when this leader proposes a plan of action, there is neither debate nor dissent. Instead of discussion, there is assent, and then a call to implementation as everyone else realizes that this is our opportunity to be part of something big, and to have a personal hand in one of those stories.

We listen to this description, and our hearts are drawn to this imaginary person as we wonder, what would it be like to live with, or work under or follow such a leader? And yet, verse 2 begins with the word "if." "If" It is a hypothetical scenario that Paul is establishing. In these first three verses, there are five "if clauses" with two of them recorded here in v.2. Paul is not saying that a person like this exists. Apart from Christ,

no one can live up to this description. But what if? Well, even if all of these things were true, instead of coming to the conclusion that this person would be a rare, precious gift to the church, someone who could charge hell with a squirt-gun and win, the text says, that without love, this person is nothing. Whoa! God is not as easily impressed as we are, is he?

There is another interesting word, even smaller than the word “if.” It is the second word, and it is the word “I.” Paul does not exempt himself from this truth. This chapter is not an airy love-song, it is a hard-hitting, heart-revealing rebuke. There were people in this church who were claiming that they were some spiritual model because they possessed a particular gift or gifts. “Paul’s strategy is to place in center stage the gift that the Corinthians prized the most and that was causing the greatest disruption in their assemble and then to bring it down several notches by showing its emptiness without love.”¹ Tongues and prophecy were the ones highlighted throughout this section (12-14), so it is safe to say that much of the battle that was being waged in the church was over the place and operation of these two gifts. Paul hits them head on, but in so doing, he puts himself in the group. His rebuke of their self-centered version of spirituality is itself an example. For, while he champions the priority of love, he models it in the way he addresses their failures. But, when you look at these 5 “if clauses” that characterize this opening section of the chapter (vs. 1-3), it makes me wonder if Paul isn’t in some way revealing his own battle and consequent understanding of this issue. Granted, Paul may be using the “I” word as a way to let these believers know that he is not exempting himself from the challenge, but when you survey this book, you can see that many of these descriptions in the first three verses in actuality fit Paul.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels...well, Paul did say (14.18) “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.” He was also taken up into the third heaven by means of a vision and “was caught up to paradise” and “heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.” (2 Cor. 12.1-5) He clearly possesses great gifts of prophecy and it was to Paul that the mysteries of God were revealed (1 Cor. 2.1; 9-10; 15.51 and even refers to himself as one “entrusted with the secret things of God.” (4.1) He states that he knows the mind of Christ (2.16) that he has knowledge (8.1) and that he has faith that has been used to perform miracles (2 Cor. 12.12). He voluntarily gave up his right to be financially supported and in 2 Corinthians he provides more detail on the hardships that he faced and the sacrifices he made even to the point of being given up for dead for the sake of Christ and his people. Look at the last verse in this letter (16.24). Look at 2 Corinthians 2.4. This man hurt deeply for these people because he loved deeply. I truly believe that if Paul was ever writing from his toenails, this is it.

Permit me an intentional rabbit trail for a minute. The Apostle Paul is often given a wrong label of being chauvinistic, bigoted or homophobic or some other modern-day slur. The cumulative affect of these attacks has given some the impression that Paul was a harsh, hardened and unloving man. I don’t believe anything could be further from the truth. The fact that a person tells us the truth about sin and the truth about God’s law,

¹ David E. Garland, 1 Corinthians, p. 611 Baker Exegetical Comm. on the NT, Baker Book House, 2003.

does not make that person unloving, quite the opposite. We need to know the truth about our sin so we can live pleasing to God.

This verse brings up some interesting issues and when we get to chapter 14 I will address the gift prophecy more extensively, since this gift and the gift of tongues are featured so prominently in that chapter. However, in order to understand this verse (v.2), I do need to say a couple of things about the gift of prophecy at this point.

- 1) The NT gift of prophecy is not on the same level as the OT Prophet.
 - a. The messages of OT prophets were not subject to change.
 - b. The messages of OT prophets were to be obeyed or face serious consequences.
- 2) The NT Apostle was equivalent to the OT Prophet.
 - a. Like the OT prophet the messages of NT Apostles were not subject to change. (Gal. 1.8-9)
 - b. Like the OT prophet the messages of NT Apostles were to be obeyed or face serious consequences. (1 Cor. 14.37)
- 3) The NT Apostle was over the person with the gift of prophecy. (14.37)

When we start chapter 14, we will see that while Paul really downplays the value and benefit of the gift of tongues, he highlights the gift of prophecy. The most excellent way for all of us, is the way of love and we are to follow the way of love (14.1). But, stop getting all wigged out about tongues, they are rather pointless and end up being more of a source of confusion than anything else. But, if you are going to desire any of the gifts, desire the gift of prophecy. This gift is mentioned almost everywhere where the spiritual gifts are listed (Romans 12., and both lists in 1 Cor. 12). For reasons that I will explain more in depth when we get to chapter 14, I believe that the NT gift of prophecy was not so much the ability to tell the future, as much as it was the God given ability to speak a timely message of encouragement, comfort, challenge or even warning to the Christian community for their benefit. In many ways, the NT gift of prophecy was the gift of intuition. This gift was seen in the person who just seemed to know what to say and what to do. In v.2, this gift is part of an attractive package that would describe to most of us an incredible leader. Basically, verse 2 describes this person in two ways: insight and vision. A person known to have great insight inspires trust in those around him. We would all love to be that type of a person.

1. **Insight is Extremely Desirable.** (13.2a)

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge

This unusual insight is described in basically two ways:

The gift of prophecy that I already touched on; and the ability to plunge the depths of mysteries and knowledge that are normally too deep for normal human discovery. A person who has amazing intuition that enables him or her to anticipate how scenarios will unfold has great insight. A person who is able to “penetrate all of the depths too

profound for human discovery”² and who is able to draw upon a vast personal reservoir of knowledge is a phenomenal asset, because he appears to always have the inside track on things. Like the previous verse, this description (v.2) played right into the minds of the Corinthian believers. This was their kind of a guy. This guy knew the secret stuff.

Have you ever had anyone say to you, “Hey! Do you want to know a secret?” What happens when you hear that? Immediately there is a line that is drawn in your mind. On this side of the line are the people who know and on this side are those who don’t. We experience this as little kids, when someone whispers something into someone else’s ear and we wonder what it is and we want to know. In the Corinthian church and in parts of Christianity today there are people who claim to know things that others don’t. They speak about the secrets of the Christian life. There are no secrets. The Bible is not a book of codes and clues that we follow so we can declare that it was Mr. Green with the candlestick in the Library. But that is what some people want to do. They want to take these spiritual gifts and turn them into marks or indicators of the supreme vs. the common. Those who have the power, the secrets, the inside track, the deeper life, have these experiences that set them apart from the average run of the mill dye-lot Christian.

So, playing their game and dancing to their music for just a bit, Paul says, “OK – What if? What if you were Mr. Big-Shot and you knew it all?” The truth is, none of us know it all. I am a dad, and when my kids ask me questions, like every dad in this room, I want to be able to give them the perfect answer that amazes them with my command of history, my vast insight into a plethora of topics. I have visions of them looking adoringly at me in wonder and thinking, “No one has a dad, like my dad.” Then there is reality. If they ask me a question and if I am able to answer it, I don’t get much past the 15 second mark, when this gray cloud fills up their eyes and they start saying, “Ok, dad, got it, got it – thanks, sorry I asked, go read a book!” We all want to be the “go-to” person. We want for people to be able to come to us for answers. I desperately want to be that for you, although I cannot. None of us can, but all of us can love. And God says that’s more important anyway.

The next “if clause” speaks of a faith that can move mountains. This type of a person inspires confidence in those around him because he is able to accomplish the impossible. We like leaders who are visionary, who dream, who aspire who take us farther than we thought humanly possible. That is why:

2. **Vision is in High Demand.** (13.2b)

if I have a faith that can move mountains

Jesus used this phrase in Mark 11.23-24 and Matt. 17.20 as a proverbial saying that referred to a person being able to accomplish difficult or humanly “impossible” tasks. That is the same way Paul is using it here. We love these sorts of stories. Who of us can forget the story of the ragtag US hockey team defeating the heavily favored Russians in

² Anthony Thiselton’s translation of this verse. See his commentary, p. 1026 NIGTC, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2000.

the Winter Olympics? I still get a little jazzed when I remember Al Michaels screaming, “Do you believe in miracles?” Coaches like this who believe when everyone else doubts, who stay the course when others fold, who face insurmountable odds and take their team to victory are in high demand. We want people like that in leadership in the church. We want our leaders to have a vision for the church. We want to know that they know where they are going and what they are trying to accomplish.

Insight and vision are good things.

3. **But without love, both are a complete waste.** (13.2c)

but have not love, I am nothing

Love is a commitment and uncompromising devotion, rooted in the very character of God Himself, to give of yourself for the benefit of another, even if that person cannot ever give back to you and even if no one else will ever know.

Gifts - Love = NOTHING!

People do not really need to be impressed with what you know, they really need to know that you really care, and that they are loved.

You have heard the saying that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. And frankly, if they know how much you care, most of the time they won't care how much you know.

Conclusion:

Practice 3 things:

1. Practice Listening.

Listen without interrupting. Ask questions for the purpose of learning more of what is going on in that person's soul.

2. Practice Looking.

Look at the person in the eye, not the whole time, necessarily, but know this, that loving a person involves listening with your ears and your eyes. In other words, use your God-given senses, your God-given gifts of sight and hearing to learn what is really going on with that person.

3. Practice Praying.

As you listen with your ears and eyes, ask God to help you know what their need is and reveal to you how you can be a dear friend, and a genuine help.