

# Covet Earnestly The Best Gifts

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There is something about the force of God's love that is stronger than we understand. When you and I were lost and undone and on the other side of spiritual death, God sent Jesus across that void to deliver us. There was no guarantee that we would accept His Son's blood and be saved, but God sent Jesus anyway. It is difficult for us to comprehend the kind of love that would compel the Father to do that for us while we were yet sinners. His great mercy caused Jesus to die; then His grace brought us into His family as though nothing ever happened.

God was willing to expend the wealth of the world to see your soul saved, and you didn't even have to beg for it. That should make you feel very special. But now let me ask you this: Are the people you encounter every day worth that same wealth?

The willingness to hurt or to hate a fellow believer is a violation of the very grace by which we were born again. That is why God is so hard on unforgiveness and strife. We didn't deserve to be forgiven; yet Jesus died for us. God is therefore not happy at all when we refuse to forgive others because we feel wronged in some way.

We can understand more about the kind of love God expects us to live by through Jesus' words to the young lawyer in Matthew 22:25-40: *Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*

Jesus said that the second commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself, was like unto the first - to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. The love with which you love God is the same love with which you love your neighbor.

You may say, "Well, I love God but not my neighbor." But that is impossible because Jesus said it is the same love - the kind of love that expends itself upon all who are within its reach.

The truth is, if we love God more than we love people, we don't have His love - we just have an unhealthy dose of religion! Religion will divide us from others. It will put us out on a limb where we are right and everyone else is wrong - and we will hurt people to prove it.

Too often we want to operate in the mighty gifts of the Spirit without having to deal with this issue of love. We want the glory of being used by God without having to live next to the base side of people. But we cannot develop in God's love and power without allowing our love for people to develop as well.

In First Corinthians 3:1-3, he states: *And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto*

*ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?*

Paul had just finished teaching that the natural man does not receive the things that are of the Spirit of God. Paul also said that he couldn't speak to the Corinthian believers as he would to those who were spiritual -that is, those who were discerning with their new nature. He had to speak to them ... as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ (v. 1). Paul was compelled to feed them with milk and not with meat, because "hitherto," or up to that point, they were not able to bear meat.

Someone once asked me regarding this passage of Scripture: "Well, if a person who divides himself against others can only be fed the milk of the Word, what does it mean for a person to be given meat?"

That is a question -most of us cannot -answer. We may think we are on meat if we know a great deal of the Word. But the truth is, we could memorize the entire Bible and still be on milk!

I remember what happened to me several years ago as I read that second verse in First Corinthians 3. These words from the Holy Spirit shot through me: "*Do you understand that the entire first book of Corinthians is written to people on milk?*"

"What do you mean, Lord?" I asked.

"The believers in that church could not bear meat - and if they couldn't bear it, I couldn't give it to them. I had to give them milk."

That is amazing when you think about it. After all, First Corinthians may be milk, but it still gets pretty heavy! Just try to understand the depths of chapter 13, the love chapter. Or how about chapter 5, the judgment chapter? That is the chapter where Paul turned a man over to the destruction of his flesh so he wouldn't level the entire Corinthian church! Yet according to Paul, all of this is milk in the eyes of God.

I know people who hold the limelight in the teaching ministry; yet they are still on milk. How do I know that? Because they have divided themselves against other people who are also on milk. That is what Paul was talking about in verse 3 when he said, *For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?*

Now, some may say, "Certainly God isn't talking about us! After all, we have the revelation! Thank God, we are on the meat of the Word!"

But look again at Paul's words in verse 3: "You walk as men." He was saying that believers who walk in the carnal appetites of the flesh appear to people both within and without the Church as those who are not even born again. He also defined what distinguishes a believer on milk: Such a person engages in envying, strife, and divisions. That person might be able to quote the entire New Testament. However, if he uses that knowledge to divide himself against someone else, God says he is still on milk.

If these things describe a Christian who is on milk, what should we be looking for in that Christian's life to confirm that he is growing spiritually? An astounding knowledge of the Word? An ability to quote long passages of Scripture? No, neither of these things prove that a person is ready for the meat of the Word. Even if that person has the ability to walk in a measure of God's power, that still doesn't prove he is ready for meat.

Too often ministers use God's power for their own gain or glory to the detriment of the Kingdom of God. That is called merchandising the anointing. God trusts them with a precious treasure, and they use it to serve the flesh. I assure you, such ministers will not last the duration of their call.

Thank God for people like Lester Sumrall and Kenneth E. Hagin! These two men spent decades allowing a root system of character and humility and faith in God to grow - root systems from which grew mighty trees that affected the entire world!

What I am looking for is proof of maturity among believers. But if that is the case, what am I really looking for? First Corinthians 12 has the answer. As we read the following passage, keep in mind that everything Paul is talking about here is all "milk."

Paul starts out in verse 1 by saying, Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant. I'm glad Paul said that, because if there is any area that I don't want to be ignorant about, it is the operation of God's spiritual gifts!

Paul goes on to list the nine gifts of the Spirit that empower and qualify the eight operations of God listed in verse 28: *And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.*

Notice that Paul lists "miracles" and "gifts of healings" here. These two gifts are actually the entry level into the fivefold ministries. They also encompass the qualifications for the operations of pastor and evangelist, which are specifically mentioned in Ephesians 4:10. In the same way, the nine gifts of the Spirit qualify us for any of these eight operations that we may be called to fulfill.

Now notice what Paul goes on to say here after he lists the eight operations: *Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?* (1 Corinthians 12:29,30).

The answer to all these questions except one is "Of course not!" We know that not all are teachers. Not all are workers of miracles. Not all have gifts of healings. But are all supposed to speak with tongues? Emphatically yes!

You see, there are four diversities of tongues. The diversity of tongues Paul referred to in verse 30 is the one used in ministry to the Body. That is why Paul asked, *"Do all speak with tongues, and do all interpret?" No, not everyone publicly speaks in a tongue that must be interpreted; however, everyone SHOULD speak in another tongue for personal edification* (1 Corinthians 14:4,28).

Paul then goes on to say, *But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.* What are the best gifts? For you, the best gifts are the ones that qualify you for your particular calling. If you are called to evangelize, your call is to the full-blown operation of the working of miracles. This gift is yours to claim, as well as several other gifts that equip and empower that calling.

As I have come into the understanding of each facet of my calling, I have coveted the gifts that accompany that call. I know how to covet earnestly the best gifts (v. 31). I know how to fast and pray and beat the devil to pieces as I stand my ground. But notice again what Paul goes on to say in verse 31: *...and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.*

What is Paul talking about? A more excellent way to do what? He is talking about a more excellent way to obtain the best gifts than to covet them earnestly - to fast and pray and walk the floor and hold off the devil as I hold my ground.

Now, that is quite a statement to make, because the act of coveting earnestly is a strong force. In fact, it is so strong that in the Ten Commandments, God included the negative side of coveting as one of the "Thou shalt nots"! Nevertheless, Paul says here that he can show us a more excellent way to obtain the best gifts than to earnestly covet them.

As we read on, remember that when Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthian church, there was no division between chapter 12 and chapter 13. He didn't change subjects between the last verse of one chapter and the first verse of the next. So with that in mind let's look at what Paul said in First Corinthians 13:1: *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.*

In other words, we are to go after the love of God with the same tenacity and intense desire with which we pursue the best gifts!

What does Paul mean when he says, *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity...?* Some preachers interpret this verse to mean that we can pray in tongues all we want, but if we don't have love, we are like a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. But that is a mistake. Paul is saying that someone who speaks in diverse tongues can still possess the capacity to be a divider, a hater, and an envious person who causes a lot of trouble. But Paul DIDN'T say that a man who establishes himself consistently in a strong prayer life of edification will REMAIN a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. For a person who fits that description, God will purge the old brass out of him and give him gold.

If you want to shorten the time it takes for you to obtain the best gifts, God will show you a more excellent way. All you have to do is bypass all the natural avenues and pray much in other tongues as you seek the love of God with intense desire and tenacity, even when it hurts. And I promise you, it WILL hurt, for the dying process required to walk in this kind of love is difficult. Nevertheless, it is the more excellent way!

So many times in the past when others wronged me, I chose to defend myself and ended up feeling

stripped of my manhood. Then God came and showed me a better way! Now I'm out of that mess forever. Sure, it was hard dying to the flesh. Each time, I had to choose to keep my mouth shut as I let the other person rant and rave or leave in a fury.

But I have made a firm decision that I am never going to stop pushing the devil around, and I'm never going to stop growing. Today I feel better than I did in my twenties and my thirties. My body feels better. My mind feels better. I am going to finish my course full of wisdom and power. I am a devastating, mountain-moving machine going somewhere to flourish, and no one or nothing can stop me!

The same thing will be true in your life as you choose the more excellent way. Each time someone wrongs you and you choose to do the right thing, there will be a death process to endure. But remember, nothing is stronger than the power of love when it is being operated by the Spirit of God and His Word!

I truly love the love of God. In fact, I am loving it more and more because I have found that it isn't until we get to a certain place in His love that we can even begin to walk in peace.

As long as we still have the capacity and willingness to hurt someone, peace will remain a distant dream. We may admire other people's speeches on peace, but our willingness to hurt others will keep us from the peace that only Jesus gives. (This is especially true when it comes to our families. Our families are not supposed to be the catch-all for our bad days!)

So let's go back to our original question: Who is it that is on the meat of the Word? Well, we know that it is someone who covets the things of God with the zest of love. We have also discovered that there is no place for envy, strife, or division in this person's life. A "meat-eater" just refuses to participate in such things. Others can live in strife and division all they want, but this person is NOT going to be a part of it.

Let's look at Ephesians 4 for more insight regarding those who live on meat. Right before listing the various callings of the fivefold ministry in Ephesians 4:11, Paul says in verse 7, *But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ*. Paul refers to this same thought in First Corinthians 12:27, right before he lists the eight corresponding operations of God: ***Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.***

Now compare these two verses to what Paul said in Romans 12:6: *Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us....* Thus, the grace Paul is talking about in this verse and in Ephesians 4:7 refers to OUR INDIVIDUAL CALLINGS. We all have different gifts, or callings, that vary according to the grace that God has given us.

It is significant that before Paul makes this statement in Romans 12:6, he first makes this statement in verse 3:

*For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man*

*the measure of faith.*

This means that we did not call ourselves to the position we fill in the Body of Christ, so why should we think of ourselves more highly than another? Did we give ourselves our calling to be a hand, foot, leg, or eye in the Body of Christ? No. Who chose it? God did. That is why He says in verse 7, "*But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ or according to the measure that Jesus is asking us to fill in His Body.*"

Jesus equipped you with these gifts by grace, so believe Him when He says you are called to fill your measure. You did not pay for those gifts. You did not earn them. You received them in the measure by which you were called.

The measure of faith was sent so you could fulfill YOUR call, not mine or anyone else's. That is why you alone get judged for it. Jesus first gave you the grace for your call; then He gave you the measure of faith to fill it. You did not deserve it and you may fall short, but He gave it to you anyway.

Now let's go back to Ephesians 4 and see what Paul says right after he lists the callings of the fivefold ministry in verse 11: *And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers. For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.* Ephesians 4:11,12.

Because these ministers nurture and handle the Word, Paul says that Jesus gave these gifts first "for the perfecting of the saints"; second, "for the work of the ministry"; and third, "for the edifying of the body of Christ."

Now, the way this verse has been taught by many ministers in the Church goes something like this: "The fivefold ministries are gifts given to the Body of Christ for the perfecting of the saints. We are gifts given to you by God for your perfecting so you can do the work of the ministry and bring edification to the Body of Christ."

As a result of this mistaken interpretation of this scripture, fivefold ministers have often exalted themselves as great gifts to the Body. In years past when I was still caught up in this way of thinking, I sometimes had a Rolls Royce at my beck and call, just in case I wanted ice cream at four in the morning. Someone would have to go and buy that ice cream for me because, after all, I was "the gift." The people to whom I was ministering were not the gift - I was! I was a gift given by God for the perfecting of the saints and the work of the ministry in order to bring edification to the Body of Christ.

But is that what Paul was really saying in this scripture? Jesus gave these gifts to the Body, but for how long and for what purpose? First, verse 13 tells us how long these gifts will be needed: *Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.*

That is the measure we are to fulfill: the stature of the fullness of our Head, Jesus Christ. Verses 14-16 go on to explain the purpose of these gifts: *That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness,*

*whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.*

When Paul talks about "every joint" in verse 16, he isn't talking about an elbow joint or a knee joint; he is talking about the entire part of the body that is represented between the two joints. And by what means did he say the whole body is fitly joined together and compacted? By that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, or of every particular calling. This constant supply from each individual calling produces an increase in the Body unto the edifying of itself in love.

Now think back to our question: What kind of person is on meat? We know it is someone who neither divides nor envies, for in First Corinthians 3, we saw that those who are on milk are the divided, the carnal, and the envious.

So who is on meat? According to Ephesians 4, it is those who increase in their calling unto the unity of the Body under obedience to the Head, Jesus Christ. These are the believers who are totally given to pursuing the fullest measure of their part, or their divine call, in order to produce increase in the Body unto the edifying of itself in love. My friend, THAT is meat!

This is a tremendous opportunity to judge yourself. Pray and let God search your heart for the more excellent way; then begin to covet love, forgiveness, and peace with the same tenacity of desire you have shown to see the power of God demonstrated in your life.

The next time someone is fighting with you and you want nothing more than to "put their lights out," decide for love instead. When someone says something ugly to you and you think of eight different ugly things you can say right back, choose the more excellent way. At that moment, you will begin to strip the power of every evil force that is trying to dominate you. The anointing of the Holy Spirit will clear and sharpen your mind, helping you know exactly how to respond in love.

This may be hard on your flesh, but I urge you to do it anyway. Remember, what you are really contending for is a high level of operation in the measure of your divine call. You are fighting for an increase in the measure of your part in the Body of Christ so you can come into the fullness of your calling in obedience to Jesus, the Head.

So submit your soul today to God. Allow Him to do this most important work on the inside of you. Ask Him to help you mortify your flesh through the power of the Spirit and to help you see people in a different light. Turn Him loose in your life by forgiving every person who has ever done anything against you. Then begin to covet earnestly the more excellent way of love.

There is only one way to walk in this kind of love -- through the grace and the strength of God. But this is the way you **MUST** take if you want to know the pleasure of walking in His unfathomable peace.