

Praying in Tongues

1 Cor. 14:18

Richard Tow 2-28-16

Intro

Based upon the proclamation God made in Isaiah 56:7 we have spent a lot of time talking about prayer. In that verse God said, "...*For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.*"¹ Of course, Jesus quoted that verse when he drove the money changers from the temple. It's very important that we understand what God wants His house to be. In the last few decades, a lot of energy has gone into finding out what people want His house to be. For the most part that winds up being entertainment in one form or another. "...*For my house*" says God, "*shall be called a house of prayer....*"

A few weeks ago we took the mandate in Ephesians 6:18 and talked about the different kinds—different expressions of prayer that believers need to participate in. Eph. 6:18 "*And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests....*" (NIV). The Amplified Bible says, "...*with all [manner of] prayer....*"

So we talked about some of the different kinds of praying that believers need to function in. We talked about petition, thanksgiving, confession, conversational prayer, intercession, praying that commands, praying that declares, and others. One of the others that we mentioned was praying in tongues.

This morning I want to expand on that subject. It is sometimes called "glossolalia" because the Greek word for tongue is "glossa."² So today we will talk about praying in tongues. To enter into this kind of prayer and to get the most out of it, there are three things that people generally need to know. (1) That it is Valuable. What are the benefits of praying in tongues? (2) That it is Valid. Is praying in tongues scripturally valid? (3) That it is Voluntary. God will not force it on you. He provides it and invites you to receive. So let's look at each of these characteristics of glossolalia.

I. Praying in tongues is VALUABLE.

A. It is an important means by which the believer builds himself up in preparation for ministry to others. 1 Cor. 14:4 "*He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself....*" The Greek word translated "*edifies*" comes from the idea of building something.³ If I am building a house, I lay a foundation; then I install studs and construct walls; then I add a roof to the construction. I am establishing and fortifying something. If I am edifying the church, I am building up believers in their understanding of the word of God, in their courage to continue with the Lord; I am fortifying them and confirming them in the faith. Being edified through speaking in tongues strengthens my inner man; I may receive revelation in that intimate conversation with Him. The edification happens in much the same way it happens in other kinds of prayer. If I am talking with God in English, that communion with the Lord strengthens me. When I am

¹ All Scripture quotes are in New King James Version unless indicated otherwise. This message is one in a series entitled "Praying Effectively."

² NT:1100 (Biblesoft's New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary. Copyright (c) 1994, Biblesoft and International Bible Translators, Inc.).

³ NT:3618 oikodomeo (Biblesoft's New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary. Copyright (c) 1994, Biblesoft and International Bible Translators, Inc.)

praying in tongues, that communion with the Lord strengthens me—because of the influence of the Holy Spirit.⁴ The only difference is when I pray in English I understand in my mind what I'm saying to the Lord; but when I pray in tongues I am conversing with the Lord from my spirit, but my mind does not understand the conversation. *“He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself....”* The Living Bible translates it this way, *“So a person ‘speaking in tongues’ helps himself grow spiritually....”* (TLB). We may not fully comprehend how that happens exactly. But we take this revelation at face value, operate in it, and enjoy the benefits. I don't fully comprehend how I can breathe in oxygen and that translates into life and energy in my body. But every time I take a breath I enjoy the benefits whether I fully understand the process or not. Bottom line; the Bible says that you are building yourself up, edifying, strengthening your inner man when you pray.

Is it selfish to edify yourself? When you meditate on the word of God, is that selfish? No, it is one way you edify yourself. When you pray in English, with understanding, is that selfish? No, that is another way you edify yourself. When you pray in tongues, that is another way you edify yourself. You do not want me in this pulpit if I have not edified myself. The more I have prayed, whether in tongues or with understanding, the more equipped spiritually I am to minister to you. The more I have studied the word and meditated on the word and edified myself in that way, the more you stand to receive when I speak to you in this message.

Some people think Paul was dicing tongues in contrast to prophesy in 1 Cor. 14. He was simply instructing them in the proper use of each one. When I am speaking in tongues, I am edifying myself. I must be edified if I am to edify you. When I prophesy (when I speak in a language others understand) I am edifying others.

We're talking about the value of praying in tongues. It is a way to build ourselves up so that we can minister effectively in the Spirit to others.

B. Praying in tongues is valuable because it enables me to communicate beyond the limits of my natural mind. 1 Cor 14:2 *“For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries.”*

I don't always know what I ought to ask for in prayer. I don't always know what I should say to the Father in prayer. I don't always know how to pray. Romans 8:26 says that *“we do not know what we should pray for as we ought....”* But the Holy Spirit helps us overcome that weakness. Sometimes He does that *“with groanings which cannot be uttered”* and sometimes He simply enables us to pray mysteries as we are praying in tongues.

When you are praying in tongues the Holy Spirit is enabling you to pray beyond your mental capacity. If I am praying for my sister in North Carolina, I might think her greatest need is financial. I begin praying for that; but then start praying in tongues. During that prayer God may have me praying for a more important need that I have no knowledge of whatsoever. And I can pray effectively for her even though I don't know what the need is. The Holy Spirit knows and He is enabling me to pray that which is hidden from my understanding.

What am I saying? Praying in tongues adds a whole new capability to the believer for communing with God and for interceding for others. Praying in tongues is valuable and any believer that is not enjoying his or her privilege in this dynamic is missing something very precious. And it is your' for the taking. Ask and you shall receive. *“...No good thing will He*

⁴ Jude 2o may be a reference to praying in tongues with Jude using the phrase “praying in the Holy Spirit” much the same way Paul uses the phrase “pray with the spirit” in 1 Cor. 14:15.

*withhold from them that walk uprightly.”*⁵ Luke 11:13 *“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”* There is no question about God’s willingness to give without respect of persons to His children, the blessed Holy Spirit. Nothing has to happen to get God willing to give you the Holy Spirit. It is His good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Ask and you shall receive.

C. Praying in tongues is valuable because it is a way that I can talk with God. 1 Cor. 14:2 *“For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God....”* How could anybody view that in a negative light? God has graciously given me a way to talk with Him even when I don’t fully understand all the mysteries involved. There is benefit in talking with God whether your mind understands the words being spoken or not.

Now I have been emphasizing verses from Paul’s instruction to the church in 1 Cor. 14. In that chapter, Paul’s purpose is to correct some misunderstandings that those people had about how to use tongues. Paul was not diminishing the value of tongues. In verse 18 he said, *“I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all....”* It was something Paul highly valued. But they were using it for the wrong purpose. The purpose of tongues is primarily for edifying ourselves in anticipation of ministering out of that strength to others. If I want to edify others, I need to prophesy or speak in an understandable language a message prompted by the Holy Spirit.

Tongues are primarily for private use. But not exclusively, there are times when the Holy Spirit will move upon a believer to speak in tongues during a congregational meeting. Paul says in 1 Cor. 14:22 that it serves as a sign for the unbeliever. The unbeliever comes into the church and hears someone speak a message in tongues. He immediately knows something unusual is going on. It gets his attention; and hopefully he will listen closely to the interpretation of that tongue. There are also times when a believer will give a message in tongues that he does not understand; yet it is in the language of another person who knows the tongue being spoken. That becomes a sign that something supernatural is going on. That happened on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:6. That is more precisely what 1 Cor. 14:22 is referring to. In this chapter Paul is simply teaching these believers how to properly exercise the gift of tongues and the gift of prophesy.

Praying in tongues is valuable because we are communing with God, we are enabled to pray things beyond our natural understanding, and we are personally built up and prepared for ministry to others as we do so.

II. Praying in tongues is VALID.

Is it scriptural for believers to pray in tongues?

The primary verse Cessationists (people who contend that tongues are not for today) use in opposition to speaking in tongues is 1 Cor. 13:8 *“Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.”*

Paul’s subject is love. He is contrasting that with the gifts that people may operate in as described in the previous chapter. He is saying that in the eternal kingdom of God, love will be the paramount, enduring thing. As wonderful as the gifts of the Spirit are, they are all for this

⁵ Psalms 84:11

life only. In the eternal kingdom we will not need tongues to pray mysteries because we will know (verse 12) as we are known. We will not need tongues in heaven. We will not need the gift of prophesy in heaven. We will be operating at a much higher level than that. So Paul goes on to say (verse 10) *“But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.”*

So in verse 12 he contrasts “now” with “then.” *“Now we see in a mirror, dimly....”* Would you say that is true of all of us? Would you say it is true even though we have the Bible? Are there things you still don’t fully understand even though you have a Bible to read? *“Now we see in a mirror, dimly....”* That is contrasted to the time when the gifts will no longer be needed: *“but then face to face.”* When is the “then” in that comparison? It is when you have arrived at a place where you are in the eternal presence of God looking at Him *“face to face.”* Just to be sure, let’s look at Paul’s second comparison of “now” and “then.” It’s found at the end of verse 12. *“Now I know in part...”* I know that statement is true of me. I only know in part; there are many things I still don’t fully understand or know. Is there anyone in this room who could say that you have now advanced to the place where that statement is not true of you? Wouldn’t you agree that because of our current mortal limitations, even with the Bible available to us, we still only *“know in part.”* Paul is contrasting that to a time when we would know all things: *“but then I shall know just as I also am known.”*

Nowhere in this discussion does Paul even mention the completion of the canon. That subject is not even in view at all. Yet Cessationists say that when the canon was completed, then that which is perfect had come and God did away with the gifts. A key hermeneutical principle for interpreting the Bible is “context”. You cannot insert your own subject into a biblical statement. You have to understand it in the context in which it is given.⁶

The logic is inconsistency when people say tongues have passed away but every time we preach we are prophesying. Now let’s go back to the verse used to argue tongues have ceased. Verse 8 *“Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away.”* To be consistent, if I am going to say that tongues ceased when the canon was completed, then I must say that knowledge has vanish away and that prophesying has stopped as well.

“For we know in part and we prophesy in part.” When I stand here and preach it is an imperfect presentation restricted by human limitations; and I only prophesy in part because I don’t have full knowledge. Verse 10 *“But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.”* So the key phrase is *“But when that which is perfect has come...”* Is that referring to the formation of the canon sometime at the end of the first century or so? Such an interpretation is not even alluded to in this passage. In heaven we will be perfected and we will dwell in a perfect environment. We will not need to pray in tongues because we will know God the way He knows us.

⁶ Fee and Stuart write, “Essentially *literary context* means that words only have meaning in sentences, and for the most part biblical sentences only have meaning in relation to preceding and succeeding sentences.” Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) p. 24.

Tongues continues to be needed today just as it was in the early church. Prophesying (speaking in a known language by the prompting of the Spirit) will continue to be in part until God brings all of this into its fullness in heaven. Then and only then will it be perfect and complete.⁷ There is nothing in the Bible that would indicate that tongues was only for the early church.

Now listen to these very specific statements Paul makes in 1 Cor. 14.

Verse 5 *“I wish you all spoke with tongues....”*

Verse 15 *“What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding.”* When you study this chapter it is clear that when Paul says *“I will pray with the spirit”* he is talking about praying in tongues. So his thought about prayer is this. I will do both. I will pray in tongues and I will also pray in English or my native language.” With Paul it is both/and, not either/or.

Verse 18 *“I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all....”* When was Paul doing his praying in tongues? Almost all of it was in his private prayer life. But he did it; and he did a lot of it.

Some of the impact of those statements gets lost in the teaching in 1 Cor. 14 because Paul is correcting some misuse of the gift. The purpose of tongues is self-edification, not public edification. Paul is teaching the church at Corinth to use tongues in that way. But never does he say it is passed away or is invalid for the believer. He wants them all praying in tongues!

Many other New Testament passages affirm the validity of praying in tongues.

In Mark 16 when Jesus told His followers to go into all the world and preach the gospel, He said in verse *“And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues....”* Tongues is not an idea Paul added; Jesus had already talked about it.

On the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the hundred and twenty, the Bible says they spoke with other tongues.

One way Peter knew that the Gentiles in Acts 10 had received the Holy Spirit was that he heard them speak with other tongues.

We don't have time to go into all the passages today. But if some religious teaching has left doubt in your mind about the validity of tongues, I encourage you to search the scriptures for yourself; find out exactly what the Bible has to say about the subject.

Three things we need to know about praying in tongues. (1) It is valuable. You need to be praying in tongues for your own edification. (2) It is valid. Praying in tongues is something Paul did often and he wanted other believers to do the same. It is scriptural.

III. Praying in tongues is VOLUNTARY.

It is hard to overstate the value God places on your freewill. Without freewill you could never enjoy a love relationship with God or with anyone else. For love to be love, it must be done freely.

⁷ Romans 8:18-19. God continues to move all creation toward the final consummation the age when all things are subdued to the Lord and God is all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).

One reason I have emphasized the value of tongues is so that you can evaluate the benefits of praying in tongues and freely choose whether you want it or not. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled.”* (Matt 5:6). Who gets filled? Those who hunger for it! So, one component of being filled with the Spirit is desire. Of course, we are not able to gage one another’s desire level; only God can do that. But we can talk about nurturing desire. The desire for something is activated by a perception of potential benefits. In about 1980 Jeanie and I bought a new, red Mustang. We had looked at a few cars; but we really liked the body design on the Mustang. It was new and we would look pretty cool in it. In contrast to the car we had been driving, it would probably not break down on us. That was a motivating benefit. Our desire really increased when we did a test drive and felt the pep in the engine. We received that Mustang out of our own free will. Nobody forced it on us. Desire built in our hearts and we chose to have it.

Jesus said, *“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”* Luke 11:13.

What is the one qualification for receiving the Holy Spirit in that verse? *“...to those who ask Him!”* The asking is motivated by desire. I pose this question to everyone in this room: Do you desire more of the Holy Spirit? Are you asking God to pour out His Spirit on you because you truly desire it in your heart? Not because others expect it of you or because it’s a duty of some sort; but because you see the value of being filled with the Spirit. Let me ask the same question about praying in tongues. Do you desire it or are you simply saying, “God knows where I am if He wants me to have it”?

When I say “praying in tongues is voluntary” I’m saying God does not impose it on anyone. It is something you “ask” for. Years ago people would spend hours at an altar asking God to fill them with the Holy Spirit. Later, many came to understand that it is a gift that you simply receive in faith. However, the hours in prayer were not in vain, because hindrances were addressed during those times of seeking God.

Receiving from God is always a cooperative experience between the giver (God) and the receiver. When you were born again, how did it happen? Was it voluntary?

Rom 10 gives us the pattern.

Verse 8 *“But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”*

The message of forgiveness was preached to you. You believed that message in your heart. That was a choice; but beyond that, you did something with your mouth. You confessed with your mouth the Lord Jesus.

Has God ever just knocked a guy off his horse and saved him that way? Yes, that’s the way Paul got saved.⁸ Is it the norm? Do we insist that people have that experience so that they can really know that it’s God? No, the norm is that a person hears the message of salvation—the gift is being offered. Out of a free will the person embraces the offer and cooperates with the Lord. Is there a supernatural component? Yes, the Holy Spirit is influencing the heart and persuading

⁸ Acts 9:3-5

the person that the message is true. But that does not eliminate the necessity for a human response. Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6).

Faith is always expressed with action. Action may include walking down an aisle to an altar, praying the sinner's prayer, publically acknowledging Jesus as Lord: "*believe in your heart*" and do something, "*confess with your mouth.*"

Now let's take all that and talk about praying in tongues. Some people come asking God to fill them with the Spirit and give them their prayer language. There is a desire; but they are so afraid it might not be God that they just stand there stoic waiting for the Holy Spirit to hit them and knock them off the horse so to speak. Yet that is not the way they received salvation. And it very seldom happens that way with being filled with the Holy Spirit. Why? without faith it is impossible to please Him. Why is that true? Because God highly honors your free will and forces nothing on you.

He will show you the benefits of the Spirit and the benefits of praying in tongues. He will reveal that to you through the Scripture. He will do all that so you can make an informed decision of the will. But He will always respect your choices in the matter.

Let me show you the cooperation in Acts 2. This was an awesome experience the apostles had on the Day of Pentecost. But it required their cooperation. First they were there seeking God in obedience to Jesus' command in Luke 24:49 when He told them to tarry in Jerusalem until they received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Five hundred heard⁹ the command and 120 were there doing that, by choice, on the Day of Pentecost. Secondly, look closely at the wording in Acts 2:4 "*And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.*" Who is doing the speaking in that verse? It's not the Holy Spirit; it's the people. They began to speak! They began to speak! The Holy Spirit does not do the speaking. He gives the utterance. That may come in the form of a few syllables or it may flow in many words. However the utterance is prompted by the Spirit; faith demands that the person speaks that out. Just like the Holy Spirit did not say the sinner's prayer for you. You had to ask for forgiveness. You had to do something. I have prayed for many people who received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The person has to respond to the promptings of the Spirit; the person has to speak out in faith. That usually begins with only a few syllables, but as they do that God honors their faith and more begins to come.

The week before I got filled with the Spirit, my two younger brothers were filled. Their experience was highly emotional and demonstrative. They got filled at the end of a service at about 10 pm. They prayed in tongues there until the pastors had to go. We guided them to the car as they continued to pray in tongues. When we were home one would begin to speak in tongues and it would set the other one off. They were also dancing in the Spirit. Of all my years, I think it was the most demonstrative experience of being filled that I ever saw. All that went on until about 2 am when they finally went to bed.

Needless to say, I wanted what they got. So the next Sunday night I was down at the altar asking to be filled with the Spirit too. People prayed for me and the Spirit gently prompted a couple of syllables that I obediently spoke out. In contrast to their experience there was virtually no emotion. I spoke a couple of syllables and was sent on my way.

⁹ Based upon 1 Cor. 15:6.

The next day was a struggle. Did I get the same thing they got? By the end of the next day, I was at peace with the fact that I received what God gave me. In time as I used what God gave, I became more fluent in my prayer language. I experienced more and more power in prayer as I continued to press into God. The same Holy Spirit who gave them the most demonstrative experience I've ever seen, gave me the least demonstrative. Yet I can testify today that I was baptized in the Holy Spirit that night on God's terms and it was no less valid than their experience. Perhaps God knew that I would be leading many people into this fullness and I needed to know that it was not based on how much emotion the person felt at the time.

Do you want to pray in tongues? Do you want more of the Holy Spirit? Do you desire these things? Are you willing to receive it on God's terms or are you dictating to Him how He has to do it? Do you want to receive now?