

1 Corinthians 12:31

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.

Analysis

But covet earnestly the best gifts—Zēloute de ta charismata ta meizona (ζηλοῦτε δὲ τὰ χαρίσματα τὰ μείζονα)—zēloute can be translated "earnestly desire" or "zealously seek." Meizona ("greater") suggests a hierarchy, though context clarifies: "greater" means more beneficial to the body's edification, not intrinsically superior. Prophecy is "greater" than uninterpreted tongues because it builds up the church (14:5). This isn't about personal spiritual status but corporate benefit.

And yet shew I unto you a more excellent way—Kai eti kath' hyperbolēn hodon hymin deiknymi ("and yet a still more excellent way I show you")—kath' hyperbolēn means "beyond measure, surpassing, exceedingly." The "more excellent way" is agapē (love), expounded in chapter 13. Love transcends all gifts—without it, prophecy, tongues, knowledge, and miracles are worthless (13:1-3). This verse bridges chapters 12 and 13, preparing the transition: gifts matter, but love matters infinitely more. Pursue edifying gifts zealously, yes—but pursue love supremely.

Historical Context

This transitional verse climaxes Paul's gift-teaching and launches into the love-chapter. The Corinthians needed correction on two fronts: wrong gifts pursued (tongues over prophecy) and wrong motivation (self-display over love). Chapters 12-14 form a unit: gifts' source (12), gifts' motive (13), gifts' use (14).

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does 'covet earnestly the best gifts' square with earlier teaching that the Spirit distributes 'as He wills' (v.11)?
2. What are the 'best gifts' for your church's context—which gifts would most edify your body?
3. How does the 'more excellent way' of love transform how you view and exercise spiritual gifts?

Interlinear Text

ζηλοῦτε	δὲ	τὰ	χαρίσματα	τὰ	κρείττονα	Καὶ	ἔτι
covet earnestly	But	G3588	gifts	G3588	the best	and	yet
G2206	G1161		G5486		G2909	G2532	G2089

καθ'	ὑπερβολὴν	όδὸν	ὑμῖν	δείκνυμι
a more	excellent	way	unto you	shew I
G2596	G5236	G3598	G5213	G1166

Additional Cross-References

1 Corinthians 14:39 (Parallel theme): Wherefore, brethren, covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues.

Matthew 5:6 (Parallel theme): Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Philippians 3:8 (Parallel theme): Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ,

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