

First Steps on Spiritual Gifts

1 Corinthians 12:1-7

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We are back in 1 Corinthians and are starting the last portion of 1 Corinthians pertaining to public worship, service, spiritual gifts, and loving one another. What do they all have to do with each other? This will become clear as we work our way through. We also will have the joy of developing our understanding of the Holy Spirit. I was praying over this message before I put it together and told the Lord that I have a lot to learn about the Holy Spirit. Anyone here have Him all figured out? I have a new book on the Holy Spirit with the title: *Forgotten God, Reversing our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit*. How true.

We all have a lot to learn and I think this section is going to challenge all of us in many ways. I would appreciate your prayers as we work through some famously encouraging and famously divisive passages of Scripture. We want the former without the latter.

My Bible titles this section of chapter 12 "Spiritual Gifts," and rightly so. The whole chapter deals with spiritual gifts. Like the other subjects from chapter 7 on, it would seem from verse 1 that the Corinthians had asked him about spiritual gifts and Paul is responding to their question. And like most of the other subjects, the Corinthians had made a mess of things. In fact, this might be the quintessential display of Corinthian confusion. After what we've seen was happening in Corinth, it would have to be pretty bad.

It's kind of like 20 years ago when I drove back and forth from Iowa to college in Michigan on I-80/94. I dreaded the section from Michigan City to the Illinois border. That stretch of road was seemingly always under construction and always in bad shape. Isn't it wonderful that so much has changed in 20 years? I remember bouncing along in my college car, a Ford Fiesta (now you know how I went through college without picking up a wife). I was bouncing along the potholes and then saw a yellow warning sign, Bump. *What have I been hitting for 20 miles? How big must the bump be if these unannounced ones are nearly blowing out my tires and this one ahead warrants a sign?* Bump.

There are lots of bumps in 1 Corinthians; you could put a bright yellow sign over chapters 12-14 that says, "Major bump ahead." But it starts out fairly benign. Spiritual gifts. *Christians get gifts?* Anyone here NOT like receiving gifts? Most of us have the gift of receiving. A heading that says "Spiritual Gifts" ought to be exciting.

Some of us are probably familiar with the subject of spiritual gifts, others less so. Let's build a theology of spiritual gifts from the ground floor. The very first verse shows that it's possible to be a Christian and lack knowledge about spiritual gifts.

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. (Verse 1)

All the translations say "concerning spiritual gifts." The word *gifts* is not actually in the original text. It literally says *about spiritual things* or *about spiritual people*. He will use the word "gifts" specifically in verse 4. Why the general "spiritual things"? This is our first glimpse into a core problem in the Corinthian church. We have seen it rear its ugly head in other areas. Remember chapter 1 and the pride they took in who they identified as their spiritual guru? Some followed Peter. Some followed Apollos. Some followed Paul. All of them

thought they were better than the others because of the leader they identified with. In chapter 8, some were proud of the freedom they had to eat meat offered to idols. Others were proud of the fact that they didn't. In chapter 11, the wealthy flaunted their wealth even at the Lord's Supper by not waiting or serving the others. Each group in each category was thinking they were more spiritual than everybody else.

We get to chapter 12 and that same selfish spirit is expressed on the subject of spiritual gifts. The Corinthians who possessed the more public or spectacular gifts were looking down on those with the more service oriented gifts. Why? It gave them a reason to look in the mirror and think they were more spiritual than other people. Isn't that always the temptation with anything – to look at outward measures rather than inward? Man always looks at the outward appearance of things but God looks at the heart. You should begin to see the irony in taking pride in a gift. If it's a gift it means someone gave it to you and you didn't earn it. There will be much more on that to come.

You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. (Verse 2)

Paul reminds them of what it's like to live ignorant of truth found in Christ. What better example than their pre-Christian pagan days? We have talked at length about the nature of the Corinthian worship of the goddess Aphrodite; it was incredibly sexual, manipulative, and degrading. For what? Something made of stone or wood by human hands. He says in chapter 10, an idol isn't *anything*. Here he calls them "mute." Idols say nothing. Hear nothing. Do nothing. *Corinthians, I don't want you to be spiritually ignorant. You know what it's like to live that way. You spent a lot of years that way. You need to live by the truth. You need to understand how the Spirit of God works in us and through us.*

Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit. (Verse 3)

This is a hard passage to interpret and there is a litany of possibilities. It would be easy to read this the way I have as a simple test to determine if the spirit speaking is the Holy Spirit or not. There is a similar passage in 1 John 4 that suggests testing the spirits in this way but the problem there was people denying Jesus as Christ. In Corinth there was polytheism, multiple gods. Notice the second clause, no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in (or by) the Holy Spirit. A better explanation here is that it is not a test of true and false spirits but rather a test of true and false Christians. For a person to confess Jesus as the one true God and Lord in a context like Corinth powerfully displayed that the Spirit had transformed him. (See D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, p. 27.)

Perhaps this is a little like the challenge our friend Abraham Thomas has in India where they are more than happy to add Jesus to their polytheistic lineup of 300 million gods. But for a Hindu to confess Jesus is the one true Lord, the one true God, can only occur by virtue of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Worshipping Jesus in India is no indication of genuine faith, but confessing the singularity of Jesus' deity and His uniquely saving work in the cross and resurrection powerfully displays the presence of the Holy Spirit in that individual.

...and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit. (Verse 3)

Right here we have a key truth about the Holy Spirit that we need to plant as a foundation stone. If someone has the Holy Spirit or when someone is controlled by the Holy Spirit, how is that expressed? *Jesus is Lord*. If you squeeze a Holy Spirit controlled person, what comes

out is confession regarding Christ. Why is that? It's not that there isn't great joy in the Spirit or worship of God the Father. These are all important. But it doesn't say that. It says the confession of the Holy Spirit transformed person is about the person of Jesus and His position, Lord of all. Why?

God the Holy Spirit Seeks to Glorify God the Son

The mission of the Spirit in this world is to glorify the Son. Jesus says this about the Holy Spirit. *He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.* (John 16:14) When the Spirit came at Pentecost (the most Spirit transformational moment in history, inaugurating the church), who did the disciples go out and preach about? The Spirit? No. Jesus. The Holy Spirit is here to glorify the person and position of Jesus. He is not here to draw attention to Himself. He is here to highlight the glory and beauty of the Son.

I heard a good illustration of this once. If you've been to the downtown of any major city, you know how they illuminate the major landmarks. Think of driving down Lakeshore Drive in Chicago at night. What do you see? Lots of lights, particularly the museums, Buckingham Fountain, Soldier Field, and other architecturally beautiful buildings. These spotlights make these limestone buildings brilliant at night. They look really cool.

Does anyone drive around the Loop and see these buildings and say, "Look at the wattage on those lamps? Wow! Would you look at those spotlights?" Do they offer tours in Chicago to see the spotlights? No. The lamps are there to draw attention to something else. When the Holy Spirit is in control of a person or in control of a church, the focus of the person or the church is Christ because that is why the Holy Spirit is here, *He will glorify me.*

I am going to come back to this point but it is a necessary parameter when it comes to spiritual gifts and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Is it possible to become too focused on the spotlight instead of what the spotlight is spotlighting? I have already said that I think the pond of Christianity that the majority of our church folk come from have focused too little on the Holy Spirit. There is an opposite danger as well. Here's the balance. When we are in the Holy Spirit, our creed is Christ.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (Verses 4-7)

Here we are introduced to what are commonly called "spiritual gifts." The word there in verse 4 is *charismata*. I want you to see this as the word itself is helpful.

Charis = grace **Mata** = gift **Charismata** = "Grace gift"

The contemporary use of the word *charismata* or *charismatic* is applied to those who practice certain spiritual gifts, but this is an unfortunate use of the word. All Christians have received *charismata* as the word is very fluid and applied to a wide variety of gifting that God gives His people. It is even used of marriage and celibacy in chapter 7. It is a good word when used properly.

These are called spiritual gifts because they come from the Holy Spirit, are empowered by the Holy Spirit, serve spiritual purposes and accomplish spiritual objectives. Let's see this in these verses.

Spiritual Gifts Come From God

There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit (Verse 4).

Look at verse 11 – *All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.* Spiritual gifts ought to be very important to every Christian if for no other reason than the person who gave them to us. For many of us, our most treasured possessions are gifts that special people in our lives gave us – the ring from my grandmother, Grandpa’s watch, a special gift from a spouse. Sometimes the thing itself isn’t really worth much, but it becomes valuable to us because of who gave it to us. Christian, as we work through chapter 12, 13 and 14, one reason this ought to be important to us is that each of us has a personal ministry gift given to us personally by God Himself.

This also rebuked the Corinthians’ haughtiness over the gifts they received. As I said earlier, if it is a gift, how can we glory in it for ourselves or think it puts us on a higher spiritual plane than someone else? They got what they got from God. I got what I got from God. It is a “grace-gift,” underserved and given without consideration of merit. There’s no room for pride in it.

There are a tremendous variety of spiritual gifts

That’s the repeated word here, *varieties* of gifts, service, and activities. These are likely synonyms for spiritual gifts and what they do. The point is the unity of source (God) and the diversity of expressions. One apparent reason Paul makes this point is that based on chapter 14, the Corinthians had become enamored and obsessed with one of the gifts, tongues. This one gift got all the attention to the detriment of the full expression of Spirit giftings. Don’t get hung up on one, enjoy the breadth of the Spirit’s workings.

God “energizes” the effectiveness of the gift

...but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. (Verse 6)

The word for “empowers” is the word from which we get our word “energy.” God gives the gift and He also energizes or animates the gift. He is the power behind its effectiveness; kind of like the gift of a battery operated child’s toy. You can give the gift to a child but the child can’t turn it on or make it go. God gives us both the gift and the batteries; the ability and the empowerment needed for that gift to bear spiritual fruit.

Here’s another corrective to anyone glorying in what their gift accomplishes. We use our gifts but God bears the fruit. Paul said the same in 1 Corinthians 3:6, *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.* Who gets the glory from that? God does.

In fact, if someone is serving in a way that magnifies himself or herself, that draws attention to himself or herself. It also draws attention to his gift for hers; it cannot bear true spiritual fruit because God will not share His glory with another. It may have apparent fruitfulness but it is not God-fruit.

The last two I am only going to mention and we will explore more next week.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (Verse 7)

Every Christian has at least one spiritual gift

We see that spiritual gifts are manifestations of the Spirit. That's an interesting way to think of it. We sing, *Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on us*. Or pray, *Holy Spirit may you be here!* How would we know if He showed up? How does He express Himself? One way He does is when member A over here is motivated to serve God and engages in ministry. That is the Holy Spirit showing up at church. Or Attendee B over here, with a fresh love for Christ, gives of her time to serve, or her money for kingdom purposes, or her whatever for the sake of God's work. The Spirit's gifts manifest the Spirit's presence.

One problem the Corinthians had was that they only equated the Spirit with the spectacular. Paul wants them to realize the more commonplace expressions of Christian service and charity are equally the expression of the Holy Spirit.

If you are a Christian, you have a gift personally given to you by the Holy Spirit. You have a purpose. You have something to do. Your gifting is your calling. What are you doing with it?

Spiritual gifts are others oriented and for the blessing of the whole church

What is a spiritual gift? *A spiritual gift is any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church.* (Wayne Grudem)

Each of us has these empowerments; gifts from God for the common good of God's people and God's glory. You. And you. And you. What is your gift? Have you thought about it? It's kind of exciting to think about. Wow! It's a personal gift from the Holy Spirit that He promises to empower which will bless my brothers and sisters and advance the kingdom of Christ and the gospel of Christ. *Little 'ol me?* Yes, you. *God can use me?* He wants to.

- *I'm not good at anything.* God promises you are really good at least one thing.
- *I'm pretty sure it's not that important.* There are no unimportant gifts of the Spirit.
- *Can't someone else do it?* Not like you can. No one else has the same gift set as you.
- *How can I find out more?* By coming next week.

We are going over this list. You may uncover your gift. Here's what I can tell you. We need every spiritual gift the Holy Spirit gives to our church. That means yours and mine. We'll have more on this next week.

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