

8 October 2023

Spiritual Gifts 1 Corinthians 12:1-12

One thing you had to say about the Corinthian church is that they were gifted. Paul celebrates the variety of their gifts in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, verses 1-12:

1² Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.

2² You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. 3³ Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

4⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5⁵ and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

8⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11¹¹ All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

12¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

After all the scolding that we've read over the past few weeks in 1 Corinthians, all the times that Paul has said "Am I supposed to commend you for this? Well, I don't!" it's nice to read something less naggy, about "spiritual gifts." In fact, if Paul is specifically referring to gifts that he knew were represented in the church, this is almost complimentary. "Look at how gifted you are!" He's being so nice! Is anyone else getting suspicious? Like, waiting for the other shoe to drop? What have the Corinthians done now?

We'll get there, but before we do, let's look at this passage of scripture a little more closely, because I have questions. I've heard idunnamany sermons on spiritual gifts in my life, to the extent that my eyes glaze over a bit when I get to this chapter, but when I look more closely at it, it's still puzzling. A "spiritual gift" would be a specific gift given by the Holy Spirit, some skill or acquirement that the person didn't have before, right? Does that check out in this list? The first two gifts listed are Wisdom and Knowledge. People don't acquire either of those things by means of some divine dispensation. One gains knowledge by study and wisdom by reflection on experience. How are those uniquely *spiritual*? And then the next one is Faith. Isn't that something that we're all supposed to have – a prerequisite of salvation? So does this mean that the Spirit makes it easier for some than for others? Really? Ah, but then we have the gifts of Healing and Miracles and Prophecy. Okay, so these sound like genuine divine bestowments, but now I have *other* questions. There were people in Corinth who could do miracles, and that gets mentioned fifth? And then there's "Discernment of Spirits?" Which is . . . what is that?

Finally, of course, we come to the gift of Speaking in Tongues. This describes an experience when someone, especially in prayer, begins to speak in an unknown language, usually

involuntarily. To observers, the sounds that the person are making feel like a language, but not one that anyone on earth speaks. Those who do speak in tongues generally say that they speak words of praise and describe the experience as a mystical communion with God. Okay, so this gift is complicated for a lot of reasons. Just one of those complications is that this one's not restricted to Christianity. Paul and the Corinthians were all familiar with the concept of speaking in tongues because it was common in certain Greek cults. Similar manifestations are described in other religions, such as the Sufi tradition of Islam. So if this is a specific gift of the Spirit, then she's been making the rounds.

To summarize, Paul's list of "Spiritual Gifts" in 1 Corinthians 12 includes some things that people acquire normally through study or experience, some things that are genuinely miraculous and also incredibly rare, and still other things that appear to be unusual but normal human mystical experiences. All lumped together under one heading. This is like a Sesame Street song called "All of These Things Are Not Like the Others." What is Paul doing? He's not a sloppy thinker, so why does this part feel so haphazard?

To figure this out, we should read on a little. Here's where we find out what the Corinthian church was doing wrong. Apparently, they were well aware of their giftedness and were competing with each other over whose gifts were most *spiritual*. There, see? That sounds like the Corinth we've come to know and love. From reading chapter 14 – which we'll look at more closely next week – it appears that the ones who spoke in tongues were *especially* snotty about how much more spiritual they were than others. Now we can see what Paul is doing. He starts off with a paragraph about how *everyone* has gifts, and how they are *all* given by the same Spirit, *for the common good*. Then, when he lists a few gifts, he does so generally in the order of their usefulness to others. Wisdom is first, and speaking in tongues is last. In the rest of this chapter, Paul describes spiritual gifts through the analogy of a body. A body is made up of different parts, and all of them have a role to play. No one part is more important than any other, because none of them can stand alone. The eye feels like a really important body part, but if that were all you were – an eye – you'd be grotesque. And you'd die. Then Paul pushes the analogy farther and points out that those parts of the body that are considered least honorable, least presentable, most embarrassing, are at least as important as the others and maybe more so. Nobody wants to be a descending colon. But nobody wants to do without one either.

So the point of this whole chapter is not the list of gifts. The point is that *whatever* gifts we may have, we are nothing apart from the gifts of others. We are as incomplete on our own as a disembodied hand or foot. What fulfills us is our reliance on each other and on each others' gifts. And that includes all sorts of gifts: the ones we have earned through years of study or practice, as well as any that are granted miraculously, along with any we pick up from other faith traditions. If we are using them together for the common good, why then it doesn't matter where we picked them up. They are still gifts of the Spirit.

In some of the sermons in this series, I've had to work to show how Paul's instructions to the Corinthians had any relevance to us. Meat offered to idols? People getting drunk at Communion? Not really problems for us, right? But this week is easy. Many of those here are old enough to remember when churches were splitting all around us over the issue of spiritual gifts and, as in ancient Corinth, especially the gift of speaking in tongues. Here in America we have a long history of Revivalism, times when the outpouring of the Spirit has been demonstrated by dramatic emotional experiences. There was the Great Awakening, followed by the Second Great Awakening, followed by any number of others. One was called the Azusa Street Revival in Los

Angeles in the early 20th century, in which the Spirit showed herself especially in widespread speaking in tongues. That revival started the Pentecostal movement and founded new Christian denominations.

Then, in the 1970s, that experience spread to other denominations as well, in what is called the “Charismatic Movement.” Groups within churches began meeting and speaking in tongues. Pretty much *all* churches. Charismatic groups appeared among Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, and in *every* evangelical denomination. And nearly everywhere it appeared, it followed the Corinthian pattern. The “charismatic” group found great joy in their gatherings, felt themselves to be closer to God after being filled with the Spirit in this way, and eventually began to wonder what was wrong with the rest of the people in the church that they *didn’t* get as close to God. They began to question the faith of any who did not have “the gift,” which you’ll be amazed to learn did not bring harmony to those churches. Thousands of congregations split over the issue. I told you a while ago that I’ve heard a lot of sermons on 1 Corinthians 12. Yeah, all in the 70s, and they were all pretty solidly anti-tongues.

I’m not, by the way. I haven’t ever done it myself, but I know others who have, and for them it was a deeply meaningful experience. I’m not opposed to that. This whole speaking-in-unknown-languages business may have been borrowed from other religions, kind of like yoga, but I have faith in the Holy Spirit to use any number of religious experiences, wherever they originated. So if you speak in tongues, cool. If you don’t have that “spiritual gift” – also cool.

Because Paul’s message to the Corinthians is not about how gifted we are but about how reliant on each other we are. Whatever your gift is, it was given for the common good. And no matter how impressive or unimpressive your gift might be, it is both necessary and not enough. None of us are complete without each other. I look around our congregation, and I see people with gifts, and I particularly notice those with gifts I don’t share. Some of you have the gift of organization. Others have a patient attention to detail. Still others have a different kind of patience – the ability to sit and listen and listen and listen without worrying about their to-do list. Some of you are visual artists. Some of you understand accounting – and Excel. Others have gifts in music – both natural gifts and gifts developed over decades of hard work. Some of you can fix things, even things you’ve never seen before, which just blows my mind. And some of you, I have learned, have deep wisdom, which I probably should have listed first, because that’s where Paul placed that one.

I have some gifts, too, and I’m aware of them. But what Paul has reminded me of this week is that whatever my gifts are, they are nothing unless they are a part of a larger body, made up of you and your gifts. But when we are joined together, with all our gifts recognized and honored equally and all our gifts used to serve others, that’s the moment when our gifts become Spiritual Gifts.