

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Introduction:

The Gift No One Wants - After a church service in which the minister had preached about spiritual gifts, he was greeted at the door by a woman who said, "Pastor, I believe I have the gift of criticism."

He responded, "Do you remember the person in Jesus' parable who had the one talent? Do you recall what he did with it?"

"Yes," replied the woman, "he went out and buried it."

With a smile, the pastor suggested, "Go, and do likewise!"

This morning we are moving into a new section in the book of 1 Corinthians. It concerns the area of spiritual gifts—the distribution of the gifts, the purpose of the gifts, the use of the gifts and the misuse of them.

Just a quick note: if you are wondering what happened to the last part of chapter 11, it deals with the Corinthians abuse of the Lord's supper and I plan to deal with that on our next communion Sunday, Dec. 2.

This morning will really be an introduction to this area of spiritual gifts and their role and purpose in the body of Christ, the church. Paul dedicates a significant portion of his letter to this subject as it was an area of considerable issue in the Corinthian church. The next three chapters (12-14) are a lengthy discussion of spiritual gifts and how they are to function within the body of Christ.

It was not that they were lacking in the area of spiritual gifts. In chapter 1, verse 7, in Paul's thanksgiving for the church in Corinth, he indicates that the church was blessed with all the gifts necessary for a healthy ministry. *Read 1:4-8.* He says they were not lacking in any spiritual gift. The problem as it appears seems to be that they were misusing and abusing the gifts, and it was creating conflict and chaos in the church, in both worship and ministry.

So, Paul began to set down some truths about spiritual gifts to correct the errors in the Corinthian church and to provide some guidance in

this area of spiritual gifts. I believe that truth and that guidance is just as relevant today as it was for the church in Corinth in the first century.

Introduction to the Text

We are not going to be going through this whole text this morning verse by verse or phrase by phrase, but rather pick out some important ideas from the text. However, I want to begin with a few observations to introduce this passage.

First, the word "*gifts*" is not found in the original text. The NKJV places it in italics to indicate that it has been added for clarity. Paul literally says, Now concerning the spirituals, or the things of the Spirit, or things controlled or directed by the Spirit. But in the context, it seems clear that he is referring to the gifts of the Spirit.

Second, this whole section (ch. 12-14) seems to be in response to another question that had come to him in a letter from the Corinthian church. *See 7:1* – from that point on, Paul uses that phrase, "Now concerning..." several times, indicating that he is responding to another question. That is what we find here in chapter 12.

Third, verses 2-3 seem like a distraction or a rabbit trail in the apostle's thinking, but I do not think they really are. We will look at them in a moment. But first I want to set out the outline of where we are going this morning.

- vv. 2-3 – A dangerous attitude toward gifts
- vv. 4-6 – the nature of spiritual gifts
- vv. 7-11 – the purpose of spiritual gifts

A Dangerous Attitude Toward Spiritual Gifts

Read vv. 2-3 – the important thing to remember here is the heathen culture of Corinth. Most of the believers there had come out of a very pagan religious background, no doubt steeped in pagan idolatrous activity. Their heathen ceremonies would have involved all kinds of satanic and mystical religious practices, including ecstatic experiences.

In the MacArthur Study Bible, he points out that, "*The practice of ecstasy, considered to be the highest expression of religious experience, involved supposed supernatural interaction with a deity, induced*

through frenzied hypnotic chants and ceremonies. The practice frequently included drunkenness and sexual orgies, to which the devotees willfully yielded themselves to be led into gross sin."

He also suggests that, *"...some church members were mimicking certain dramatic and bizarre practices of the mystery religions in which they had been formerly involved."*

This would certainly lead to all kinds of confusion, so Paul makes a very important clarification at the very beginning of this dissertation about the gifts of the Spirit. He assures them that anyone who is blaspheming the name of Jesus is not speaking by the Spirit of God. And conversely no one can truly acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus except by the Spirit. It appears that they were judging the use and value of their gifts by their experience rather than the content or message.

But there is a huge difference between the Spirit of God that exalts and glorifies the Lord Jesus and the spirits of the enemy that lifts up human experience as determining truth.

The Nature of Spiritual Gifts vv. 4-6

Paul goes on in vv. 4-6 to give us a tribute to the triune God as he describes the nature of spiritual gifts. *Read vv. 4-6* – notice – same Spirit ... Lord ... God.

But what is the nature of the gifts that come from the Spirit of God? There is something of a progression in these verses:

- Varieties of gifts – there are different categories of gifts. When you look at the lists of spiritual gifts here and Romans 12 and Eph. 4, it seems there are two main categories of gifts. There are the permanent gifts that will operate throughout the church age. Their purpose is to edify the church and glorify God. They can be further designated in two groups which MacArthur identifies as speaking, or verbal, gifts (prophecy, knowledge, wisdom, teaching, and exhortation) and serving, nonverbal gifts (leadership, helps, giving, mercy, faith, and discernment).

Then there are the miracle or sign gifts (tongues, interpretation, healing, miracles) which were given to authenticate the apostles

and their message a being the true Word of God until the written Word was completed. But whatever the category our gifts come under, they are all given or distributed by the Holy Spirit.

- Varieties of service – there are different areas of ministry in which these gifts are used. We all have unique ministries in which God has intended us to use our giftedness. But it is the same Lord that is the impetus behind it.
- Varieties of activities – there are different ways in which those gifts express themselves. We are all unique in our personality and temperament and the gifts will be expressed in different ways, but it is the same God who empowers us to accomplish his will and purpose.

The Purpose of Spiritual Gifts vv. 7-11

It is interesting to note that Paul's list of spiritual gifts in these verses focuses not exclusively, but quite significantly on what I call sign gifts – miracles, healing tongues, interpretation of tongues. Perhaps that is because of the focus of the Corinthian church. They seemed to be enamored with these particular gifts that tended to draw attention to the individual. And that goes against the overall purpose of spiritual gifts.

So, what is the purpose of spiritual gifts? I want to pick up one important thought from this passage and then look at a couple of other passages regarding gifts.

Look at v. 7 – *read it*. He has just said, there are different gifts, used in different areas of service and expressed in different ways, but they are all give for one purpose – for the common good (NKJV – for the profit of all).

Turn back to Romans 12 – *read vv. 3-8*. Here we have another list of gifts. But what are they to be used for? They are for the body – the benefit of the church. The focus is the body, not the individual.

Now, turn over to Ephesians 4 – Paul is talking about unity and he says, *read vv. 3-8, 11-12*. Note that again, the focus is not on the individual but on the body, the church. God gave these gifts and gifted people to the church for the edification of the church. God did not give you the gift of teaching for your benefit, so you could be a great teacher. He did it so that through your teaching the body would be built up. He did not

give you the gift of administration so you would be admired for your skill. He did it for the benefit of the body, so things would be accomplished for his glory.

Years ago, there was a great focus on the question, what is your spiritual gift. I remember doing tests, or inventories to determine my spiritual gift. I never did quite figure out what it was! I think there are a couple of flaws in that whole approach. First, the key question is not what my spiritual gift is. The real question is what gift the Spirit wants to give to the church through my presence. The second flaw is the assumption that a spiritual gift is a one-time forever gift given for life. I believe the Holy Spirit is able to gift us in supernatural ways as the need arises in the body.

The real purpose of spiritual gifts is for the local church the body of believers to have every gift necessary for it to flourish at any given time in history. God has given each of you gifts because they are needed for this church fellowship to grow and thrive.

Conclusion

Well, we need to wrap this up. Let us consider for a moment the question of how the Spirit has gifted each one of us for the benefit of this church body. God has placed you in this local body because you have a gift to contribute to the growth and maturity of the church. I believe that everyone who is a part of this body, whether for a lifetime, or for a short time has gifts to contribute to the growth and edification of the body.

We will be looking more at the aspect of the body as we continue through chapter 12 another time. But for now, the question is, am I using my gift or am I hiding it? If we keep our gifts to ourselves, we do not grow, and the body loses out on what our gift was meant to contribute.

One closing thought – it seems that the Corinthian church was divided over the issue of gifts because they were placing superior value on certain gifts. Just like they each had their opinion of which leader was better or more important, they also were divided over which gifts were more important. Paul reminds them and us – *read v. 11*.