

Title: "So, what about these spiritual gifts anyway?" – pt.1
Text: 1 Cor. 12.8-10
Theme: Spiritual gifts
Series: 1 Corinthians #56
Prop Stmt: Spiritual gifts have to point us to Christ.

Read Text:

If you have been keeping up with the events in the Middle East, you have to wonder if we are witnessing the build up to a major world conflict. Granted, another UN resolution could be sought, implemented and enforced that would tone down the intensity, but we are witnessing the change of world opinion before our eyes. Not too long ago, it would have been difficult to imagine the entire world turning on Israel, now that situation is very plausible. I am not suggesting that we fear this. Not at all. I am suggesting that we recognize that we could be getting very close to seeing the events that precipitate the return of Jesus Christ. The truth is, we live for this. (or at least we should) Yes, this could mess up our plans for a long, peaceful life with a 25 year retirement, but the events that surround the return of Christ are going to mess up somebody's world, it might as well be ours. But, we aren't quite so sure – are we? We had hoped that all of the instability would be far off in the future so it wouldn't mess with our plans. We thought we had everything figured out, everything under control. That is why I am pressing you to both listen and live with an urgency that should be part of our lives anyway. You and I cannot make a better investment of our hearts and lives than in the church, because the church is the means that God has chosen to bring about the rescue of people from this fallen and falling world. The work that we are called to do to accomplish this is challenging and at times messy. The fact is, we cannot pull it off without you, and you cannot pull it off without the church. But herein lies much of the challenge. We love Jesus, we think, but sometimes His people drive us crazy.

It is human nature to strive to become independent. We do not want to depend on others for money, for physical assistance (parents hate to be a burden on their children), for helps with projects, on doctors for health, on others for counsel, we do not like being needy. We tend to want to isolate ourselves and withdraw and pretend that we can live our lives all by ourselves. Children exhibit this, spouses, etc. At times we do not mind using people to help us become independent, and certainly we do not mind using God to help us become independent of others (and even God) as well. Simon the Sorcerer evidenced this attitude in Acts 8 – he was willing to pay money for the Spirit's power because he wanted to use it for himself. But, when you become a follower of Christ, your standing with God changes (justification) and your standing with others changes (church body). The family of believers is a group of people who are called to depend on each and to minister in such a dependent network of relationships that our lives actually put on display the very nature and attributes of God. There is no such thing in the Scriptures as a lone ranger Christian. In order to facilitate the function of this, the Spirit of God provides what we call spiritual gifts to the people in the church in order to carry out the life of the church. Definition: ***a God-given ability bestowed upon a believer in order to minister to the church.***

These God-given abilities can be natural looking things such as teaching, mercy, helps and more supernatural looking things such as healing, miracles and tongues. The five different lists (1 Cor. 12. 8-10; 1 Cor. 12. 28-31?; Rom. 12; Eph. 4, 1 Pet) include some natural abilities that are called spiritual gifts, but it does not include all natural abilities, some of which are very helpful in building up the church. Therefore, it is possible that not all spiritual gifts are listed in these 5 lists. In addition to that, there seems to be some overlap between the gifts (e.g. faith and healing) all of which leads us to believe that these gift lists were not given for us to take elaborate detailed inventories, create explicit categories and pigeon-hole people with all of this introspection which can become very self-focused. When that happens, the very purpose of the gifts is lost. If in getting ready for our church picnic someone says, “Hey can you give us a hand in moving these tables and chairs” and you say, “Sorry, I have the gift of teaching, that task does not bring me too much fulfillment” you have completely missed the point. Granted, these gifts are listed in order to help us understand, appreciate, affirm and appropriately employ people in a variety of ministries in the church that are suitable to them. But, we all share in

What are the gifts listed here? We are going to start working through them. The question of; are they all still in operation today is best answered by the text in 1 Cor. 13.8-12. Therefore, I will save that question until then, since I cannot really answer that question without doing a thorough study on those verses. Besides, I do not want the question of cessation or continuation to be the main focus. One of the reasons why that debate takes place is because Paul does not come right out and say, “These supernatural type gifts will only be in operation until the last of the apostles die. After that, they will stop.” On other hand, nor does he come right out and say that all of these gifts will be in unceasing operation until the end of the church era. Since the text is not that clear, we have to have a measure of caution as we formulate a view that is consistent with this and the rest of the Bible. Now, we are used to looking at these gifts as being either more natural or supernatural gifts. Because of the debate, we tend to divide up the gifts in a way that Paul doesn't. I am not sure that such a clear line exists between them. The more I study this, the more it appears that there is a good deal of variety even within the gifts themselves that makes it difficult to label one supernatural and another natural. The gift of faith is one such example that we will look at later on that may have been in operation in Corinth as both a more natural and a supernatural gift. But, even those labels do not really work since all of the gifts are from the Spirit, they can all be labeled supernatural.

There are nine gifts mentioned in this first list. There have been a variety of ways that people have tried to organize them with the 2 – 5 – 2 approach being a popular one, as some have said that the first two: wisdom/knowledge are intellectual or intellectual power gifts, the next five: faith, healing, miraculous powers, prophecy and distinguishing of spirits are special energy of faith gifts and the last two: tongues and interpretation of tongues being language gifts. Others have tried to divide the list up between miraculous and natural gifts, which as I mentioned before is difficult since each gift seems to have in itself a variable scale of intensity. So, on the one hand while the gifts of wisdom and knowledge certainly appear to work together (beginning of the list) and the gifts of tongues and interpretation obviously work together, (end of the list) the other five are not

quite so clear. Fact is, the gift of prophecy, like the gift of tongues is probably more of a speaking gift, and yet in between prophecy and tongues is the gift of distinguishing between spirits. A clear organizational, thematic, or functional order is not readily apparent. Again, it appears that Paul is simply mentioning some, not necessarily all of the gifts that were in operation in Corinth. That does not mean that there is no purpose at all to this order. Fact is, I think that he deliberately chooses wisdom first and tongues last, since tongues was being abused and true wisdom was being ignored.

I will make this point over and over in our study. Some have pounced on the fact that some of the gifts were being abused as an excuse to make a whipping post out of those gifts. The non-miraculous crowd can certainly lean in that direction. But, be careful because the abuse of a gift does not automatically negate the use of the gift (e.g. preaching, teaching).

So, here is what I am attempting to do. I want to deal with every part of this text without losing sight of its main message and thrust. We are going to look at the individual gifts, but we have to look at these individual gifts with a view toward their corporate purpose, their Divine source and their God-glorifying function. So, the wording of the points will themselves be wordy, but necessary to keep this in mind.

The first gift that is mentioned is the gift of wisdom. So, here is point #1.

1. **The gracing of the church through the manifestation of the Spirit as seen in the message of wisdom which is given to bring spiritual help to all of the members of the local church.**

Do not forget that each gift comes from grace and has to be handled with great humility. With that said, and recognizing that the gift of the message of wisdom is a gracious gift of God that is given to some people for the benefit of all his people and is graciously given through the Spirit – what exactly is the gift of the message of wisdom? Frankly, it is not that simple to define since whenever the gifts are mentioned, they are simply mentioned and not defined. We are left with what I believe is intentional ambiguity because dividing people up on the basis of gifts is not the heart of the text anyway. But, that does not mean that they no meaning either. But these first two are a bit challenging since this is the only place in Scripture where these two gifts are mentioned with this wording.

On a popular level, what many think is a message of wisdom or a message of knowledge seems to me to fit more with the gift of prophecy. Today, based on what I have read and what I hear, many view these gifts (message of wisdom and knowledge) as a spontaneous (revelatory) message from God that is given to a member of the church for direction (wisdom) or perhaps for insight into a person's problem (knowledge). In other words, if I am about to change jobs, I want someone with a word of wisdom or a word of knowledge to tell me whether or not I should do this. I am not convinced that is what is meant, but again, we are dealing with limited data on this from the NT. But, the conditions of the church at Corinth and what Paul has previously written are very helpful. While wisdom

is certainly in a general sense “the ability to understand God’s Word and his will, and to skillfully apply that understanding to life¹” Paul here is speaking of the message (logos) of wisdom which leads me to think that the gift of wisdom is a bit more specific than that. Go back to opening chapters of this book and you see this huge contrast that is set up by Paul between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God.

Let’s review: Some of the members of the church at Corinth thought they had the inside track on secret knowledge that gave them a higher standing than the rest. This opening section of this book absolutely blows that up! You think you are so wise? You think you are so intellectual? You think you are so powerful? You are clueless! You want wisdom – go to the cross! The cross destroyed the wisdom of man. You think you are so smart, so intellectual, go to the cross! The cross is where God made fools out of man’s so called knowledge. You think you have power – go to the cross – that’s power! Power to save, to forgive, to declare righteous, power to lay down a perfectly innocent, and completely powerful life in order to die for His own. I think that our understanding of wisdom in chapter 12 has to be seen in light of wisdom in chapters 1-2. In other words, the gift of the message of wisdom is the God-given ability to understand the many implications of the cross in everyday life.

1 Cor. 1.17 – 2.14

People with this God-given ability are an immense blessing to the church. For example, let’s say that you have two people who are really struggling with a personal matter between them. They have tried different ways to move beyond the problem but they just cannot seem to get past it. One or the other keeps bringing it up and instead of going forward they keep moving backward. A person with practical insight into the message of the gospel can relate the truths of the cross to those people in a personal and powerful way that puts the entire problem and their responses into a completely different light. Instead of looking at the situation in light of what the other person has done to me, they now see their own life in view of the cross and what their own response needs to be. The difference is huge. Based on how Paul uses this idea in the beginning of the book this is more in line with what he had in mind when he spoke of the gift of the message of wisdom. In short it is the ability to recognize how God’s purposes through the cross can be lived out in life everyday.

2. **The gracing of the church through the manifestation of the Spirit as seen in the message of knowledge which is given to bring spiritual help to all of the members of the local church.**

Once again, it is common for people to think of the gift of the message of knowledge as being some revelation from God of information that otherwise would not have been known but is helpful in solving a problem. Honestly, I am not convinced that you can tell a great deal of difference between these first two gifts. That is part of the picture that is developed later in the chapter. No part of the body is disconnected from the rest, but it functions in perfect harmony. There is probably an intentional blurring of distinction

¹ MacArthur Study Bible p.1716

here between some of these gifts just to prove the point that the whole team is needed, not in isolated groups, but as an integrated whole. Think of it. It would probably be difficult to have one or more of the gifts of healing if you did not have some measure of the gift of faith. And some of the gifts of healing would probably qualify as miraculous powers too. So, I do not think that Paul intended to construct an entirely separate category for the gift of the message of knowledge in contrast to the gift of the message of wisdom. They obviously work in harmony together and with the rest of the gifts. Since again, we have limited NT data on this, we will focus our attempt to understand this based on what the text has already said about knowledge. What is said about knowledge is certainly tied up with the same passages where Paul speaks about wisdom.

When you go back and read 2.6-16, knowledge is insight into the ways and purposes of God. It is insight into what God is doing in the world and more importantly, in the church. The fact that these gifts are presented together is because you cannot have insight into the ways and purposes of God without a clear understanding of the cross and the gospel.

In view of the fact that the “miraculous” side of the congregation were looking down their spiritual noses at the “non-miraculous” side, Paul in presenting this list of spiritual gifts no doubt lists both miraculous and non-miraculous type gifts in an effort to prove his point that both need each other. And since most of these gifts listed here could and should be understood more in the miraculous category, with the possible exception of tongues and aspects of the gift of faith, I think that it therefore makes a ton of sense to see the gift of the message of wisdom and the gift of the message of knowledge as non-miraculous gifts. So – what? Actually, it is a huge what! At the end of chapter 12, we are told to desire the greater gifts. What makes a gift greater? Power? Awe? Amazement? No, the greater a gift is, is determined by the greater good, the greater benefit it has for the rest of the church. Since we are told to eagerly desire the greater gifts, leads us to believe that we bear some Spirit-driven responsibility with this. In other words, gifts are not all momentarily, instantaneous zaps of vision, power and revelation. Some gifts are very daily and can be pursued and should be pursued and desired. Since the gift of the message of wisdom and knowledge are listed first, it seems to me that these would be two gifts that it would make sense to desire, because of the enormous benefit that they can have to other believers.

Also, would it not make sense that if God has given to the church people who have these gifts for our benefit, then should we not listen to them and read them? Some of you are amazed at the insight that other people have in regards to the doctrines of the cross. How much time do you spend watching the Weather channel or Sports Center or the News simply repeat the same thing over and over? For some of you, there is a great deal of time that could be invested in better ways.

I have prepared a list of books at the bookrack that can provide you with some good meat for your mind to chew on as you work on the implications of the gospel for your daily life. Brothers and sisters true Christianity is a daily life that is driven by the cross. The world does not care that you come in here and they don't care what we do while we are

here. What makes a difference is when we leave and how we live out there. Figuring out what God is doing and learning how to live in light of the cross are huge steps in helping us to live. You need to desire these gifts and utilize the means that God has provided to help you develop a greater cross-centeredness to your own life.