

INTRODUCTION

When we read any of the NT Epistles, I always remind people that we are reading someone else's mail!

Paul wrote this particular letter, to a specific congregation located in Corinth, Greece. Corinth was an international crossroad, a metropolitan city where many different religions were practiced. The influences of pagan/non-Christian religions, as well as other disputes among the leaders and misunderstandings were threatening to divide the church. Let me point out also the context of this chapter within Paul's letter: In chapter 12 he writes about spiritual gifts, chapter 13 is the well-known "love chapter", followed by chapter 14, which focuses on the gifts of prophecy and tongues in the context of worship.

The context itself reminds us that without love, any gift becomes as nothing, it's value is negligible. Gifts exercised in love, energized by God's Spirit, are those which will make a lasting difference in the world!

As their pastor, Paul was motivated to write to this beloved congregation, compelled to both correct them and inform them.

This was, if you will, a teachable moment in the life of that church. I trust we too shall learn from what Paul has to say.

READ I CORINTHIANS 12:1-11

12 Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. **2** You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. **3** 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.

4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; **5** and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; **6** and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. **7** To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. **8** To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, **9** to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, **10** 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. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. [Pray]

Ignorance is bliss, right? Isn't that the proverbial saying? Paul would dispute that! He does not want the congregation in Corinth to be ignorant, specifically when it comes to spiritual gifts.

What or Who is the source of spiritual gifts?

In the first instance, he is clear: The first work of the Spirit is to bring us to faith: "Jesus is Lord" was the first credal statement in the New Testament church. Whenever a person makes a public affirmation, that "Jesus is Lord", it is possible only because the Holy Spirit has already been active in that individual's life. That is a given. Being possessed of faith and of the Holy Spirit is a pre-requisite to receiving a spiritual gift. To say "Jesus Is Lord" is a very basic, but essential confession in the Christian faith.

Therefore, the source of all spiritual gifts--the giver of all good gifts--is the Holy Spirit, whom we believe to be the third person of the Trinity.

Three times in verses 4-6 Paul refers to the working of the Spirit, each attributed to a different person of the Trinity: Spirit, Lord (Jesus) and God the Father who "works all of the in all people".

Does every believer have one?

This time of year, all Peanuts comic strip fans start to think about the Great Pumpkin. I was at Hometown Harvest out at the Matson Garden and Farm yesterday and I saw some great pumpkins! In one strip, Linus is sitting at his desk writing a letter to the Great Pumpkin. In each frame, we see what he has written, while big sister Lucy is standing over his shoulder exclaiming her disbelief.

Frame 1: Dear Great Pumpkin: Halloween will soon be here and we are all looking forward to your arrival. Lucy: "Ridiculous!"

Frame 2: On Halloween, you will rise up out of the pumpkin patch and fly through the air. Lucy: "Absurd!"

Frame 3: You will bring presents to all the good little boys and girls in the world. Lucy: "Preposterous!"

Frame 4: I have tried to be good all year long, and I hope you will bring me lots of presents. Lucy: "Crazy!! Completely Crazy!!"

Frame 5: As Linus puts on his coat and cap, preparing to go to the mailbox, Lucy declares: "Outrageous!"

Frame 6: Lucy follows him as they walk to the mailbox, and she continues her tirade: "Insane! Totally and completely insane!"

Frame 7: Linus drops the letter into the mailbox and walks back home.

Frame 8: Lucy looks after him and shouts: "Did you tell him I've tried to be good too???"

We laugh, but the truth is, if someone is handing out presents, we want one don't we?? Of course! And God gives to each of us according to "the measure of grace that God has given us (Romans 12: 3,6).

In other words, yes, each believer is a recipient of a God given gift.

God distributes spiritual gifts as God sees fit. We don't get to choose. That said, Paul says to "desire or strive for the greater gifts" (v.31) at which point he launches into his teaching about LOVE. Without love, the gifts—even the most spectacular—are rendered as worthless.

Love is what makes the difference. That is why Mother Teresa could say: "Do small things with great love." No two gifts will "look" exactly the same, because we are not the same. Two individuals may both have the gift of teaching or the gift of hospitality, but how each person exercises that gift will take on its own unique "flavor", if you will. But the exercise of all gifts will result in unity among us.

What is a spiritual gift?

While there are lists of gifts--in Romans 12, here in I Corinthians 12 and in Ephesians 4--these lists are not all inclusive. Rather they are suggestive of categories of gifts, if you will. Besides which, as I mentioned last week, God who is infinitely creative can give specific and unique gifts to the church at different times, in different cultures, and so on, which are intended for that group, that time, that place. God is not confined to a list of gifts!

Briefly, the gifts described in scripture fall into several categories:

Gifts of Leadership--which include preaching /prophesying /teaching /exhortation /administration /communication. The content of what is spoken or communicated here must always be in agreement with God's Word, and their intent it to help believers better understand God's intentions for us.

Gifts of Mercy--helps, hospitality, healing, giving/serving. These are very practical gifts. Our deacons--ushers--greeters--and those who prepare refreshments for our fellowship time, meals for those following surgery, transportation to Dr appointments or to worship, assisting with the Full Bellies meals, volunteering at Pennies from Heaven, POM and the food banks--all of these are gifts of mercy.

Gifts of Miraculous power--discernment of spirits/healing/exorcism while not as common today as perhaps during the life of the early church, these are still spiritual gifts exercised by trained counselors and spiritual directors.

Gifts of Utterance--wisdom/tongues/interpretation. These gifts are those which Paul takes care to describe carefully. The gift of speaking in tongues or a "heavenly prayer language" can enhance one's individual prayer life. When practiced in the context of corporate worship, Paul is careful to say that it must be accompanied by another person bringing a word of interpretation, so that it builds up the body of Christ. Otherwise, it is intended to enrich an individual's own personal worship and spiritual life.

So these are the broad brush strokes or categories of gifts that are described in scripture. When it gets down to specifics, it is quite interesting to me that commentators and scholars differ--split hairs, actually--over the difference between a natural talent, a learned skill, and a spiritual gift.

I really don't want to argue over whether or not our pianist's ability to play the piano is a natural talent, a learned skill or a spiritual gift. It is all three! And we listen in worship; we experience it as a spiritual gift as the music she produces focuses our attention beyond the musical sounds themselves, to the God who is glorified as a result!

As with most natural talents or learned skills--one's expertise in any field is improved through learning, through practice, through feedback, through experience. It is rare, if not impossible, for a person to exhibit a full-blown talent right from the start. One might have perfect pitch, but developing that into an ability to communicate meaning and emotion through song, requires time/training and practice.

That said, I have known children who had the gift of generosity from an early age; another who has the gift of winsome witness to Jesus.

Age is *not* a determinative factor when it comes to being a recipient of a spiritual gift. *Availability* to God and the Spirit, is the determinative factor!

The Spirit of God animates us as we exercise our gift, whatever that gift is. In other words, V. 6 says our gift is a manifestation of the Spirit's work. *God is at work* when we are exercising or using our gift. In other words, spiritual gifts are the "concrete way God expresses his grace through us in ministries directed and energized by the Holy Spirit." (Berding/p.218 A.F. Johnson)

For what purpose are spiritual gifts given?

Gifts are *NOT given for our own satisfaction* (although we do experience a sense of fulfillment when we engage in them).

Nor are gifts conferred upon us as status symbols! Quite the opposite! These manifestations of the Spirit are to benefit or to advantage the whole community. Remember, according to Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 12, *we are to have the attitude of humble servants...*"living sacrifices, and remember "how low can you go?" (John 15, washing the disciple's feet)

Gifts are given for the benefit of the rest of the church, for the body of Christ. My gifts benefit/bless you, yours bless/benefit me, and everyone else. It is for the mutual edification of the church that the Spirit gives gifts to believers.

How many gifts are there?

Depending on how one count the ones named, there are upwards of 20 gifts named. However, as I said earlier, these are not an exhaustive list. There are an infinite number of gifts, although they tend to fall into various categories.

Perhaps the challenge is to discover one's gift and then to activate it in the service of Christ, for the common good!

Now I have a gift right here. It was a birthday gift. My birthday was in March. Now it appears that this gift has not been opened but it has. I'll show you what it is...it is a Fitbit. A high-tech device to help track fitness, in a variety of ways. My sister (shhh, don't tell her that it is still in the box!!) has a Fitbit and she really likes hers and uses it all the time. She thought I would like one and she very generously gave me this gift.

The problem? I've opened it..I know what it is, but I'm not using it! It has just been sitting in the box. Does it do any earthly or heavenly good there? Of course not! Until I get out the instructions, read them, and "activate it" and sync it to my phone and/my computer, it won't work. It is useless.

In a similar way, until we "try on" or "activate" our gift that God gives us, it won't be a blessing to anybody. No one will benefit from it. It is wasted. In fact, I'd go so far as to say, the body of Christ is weaker for the lack of your using your spiritual gift. We are not all God intends us to be, if our gift is not in use.

Do gifts change over time? Do they differ depending on various seasons in our lives and in the life of the church? I believe they do. However, we all have a gift and we all have something to contribute.

It is so important to not only identify our gift, but to exercise it and put it to use!

You may be wondering, 'how can I know what my gift is?'

Let me suggest the following:

1. Make sure you are a believer, for only a child of God receives spiritual gifts. (John 1:12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.)
2. Familiarize yourself with the descriptions of spiritual gifts. (Romans 12, I Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4)
3. Present yourself to God as a "living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1-2)
4. Pray for wisdom, and God will guide you. (James 1:5 If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.)
5. Jump in, find an area of service. Start small, but start somewhere. Discover what brings you joy and listen for the feedback of others. God will bring confirmation as you serve in faith!

How do we live our common life, and exercise our spiritual gifts at the same time?

Last week, from Romans 12 we learned about having a sound estimate of ourselves, while living faithfully in mutual dependence with other believers.

Gifts do not confer status--none carry more status or "weight" than others--all are equally important and essential to the health of the church. Don't waste our time on trying to "keep up with the Spiritual Joneses" or in "gift envy." Be content with the gift God has given you and utilize it for the common good!

SUMMARY: Paul's emphasis is on the ONE source, the Spirit, and the Spirit's sovereign choice as to what ministries are exercised and through whom. This divinely created diversity-unity dialectic ensures the significance of each one and at the same time the essential interdependence of each one, with all others.

Next week we'll consider Paul's image of the Body--in all its diversity but its essential unity.