

## THE MERCIES OF GOD: Gifting

**“As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” ~ 1 Peter 4:10**

### Introduction

Directly related to the believer’s immersion into the Holy Spirit at conversion and the Holy Spirit’s now permanent indwelling (see last session, “Indwelling”), the believer now enjoys a *new spiritual enablement* that makes him an instrument for God in His work of saving others and transforming them into the image of Christ. This *new enablement* is known as *the spiritual gifts*.

The topic of spiritual gifts is often not included under the heading of salvation. Yet according to Ephesians 4:7-8, **the giving of the gifts is a direct outcome of Jesus’ accomplishment in the work of redemption**. The Apostle Paul writes, “But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore it says, ‘WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES, AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN’” (Eph 4:7-8).

The “grace” that Paul refers to in Ephesians 4:7 is not salvation itself, although that is certainly a great grace! Instead, the “grace” that Paul refers to is the unique spiritual giftedness every believer now enjoys. To illustrate his point, Paul goes on in v. 8 to quote Psalm 68:18. In Psalm 68, David celebrates God’s conquest over the Jebusites who had occupied the city of Jerusalem. In that context, David uses the analogy of the conquering king who leads defeated enemies through the city as a spectacle, and who receives the praise of his people for his supremacy. Paul uses that same analogy in Ephesians 4, showing that the Messiah—Jesus—was victorious in conquering His enemies. Through His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead, He made a spectacle out of sin, death, and Satan. Moreover, Jesus not only receives the praise of His people for this victory; He also distributes the “spoil” to His people as evidence of His victory. As Paul states, “He gave gifts to men” (4:8), and then even mentions some of those gifts in the subsequent context (see 4:11-16).

Spiritual gifts must be understood as an integral part of the doctrine of salvation. They are fruits of Jesus’ atonement. In fact, the topic of spiritual gifts is so important that a considerable amount of instruction in the New Testament is devoted to it (see especially Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12-14; Eph 4:7-16; and 1 Pet 4:10-11). Yet there are few things as contested among Christians as that of the gifts. As MacArthur and Mayhue state, “Few areas of doctrine are more controversial or confused in the church today than spiritual gifts. Such was also true in the first century, at least in Corinth” (*Biblical Doctrine*, 800). There is a distinct need to take time to examine this topic. Paul himself states, “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware” (1 Cor 12:1).

### A. Key Terms and Definitions

This study can only provide a survey of the most pertinent issues related to spiritual gifts. The key terms are “spiritual gift,” “continuationism,” and “cessationism.”

**1. “Spiritual Gift.”** It is helpful to note the Greek words that are used to refer to spiritual gifts:

- (a) The words **χάρις** (*charis*) and **χάρισμα** (*charisma*) are sometimes used to refer to these gifts. These related words refer to “grace” or “bestowed favor.” For example, “But to each one of us grace [*charis*] was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph 4:7); and “Since we have gifts [*charisma*] that differ according to the grace [*charis*] given to us, *each of us is to exercise them accordingly*” (Rom 12:6).
- (b) The word **πνευματικός** (*pneumatikos*) is sometimes used. It refers to something “pertaining to the inner life” or “pertaining to the Spirit.” For example, “Now concerning spiritual gifts [*pneumatikos*], brethren, I do not want you to be unaware” (1 Cor 12:1). The use of this word emphasizes that these gifts are spiritual in nature, not natural.
- (c) The word **μερισμός** (*merismos*) is used in Hebrews 2:4 to emphasize sovereign “distribution”: “God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.” These gifts are not chosen by those who receive them.
- (d) In Ephesians 4:8, the word **δόμα** (*dōma*), “gift,” used to emphasize the notion of blessing.

By these Greek words chosen by the NT writers we get the basic sense that spiritual gifts are: *unmerited grace*; they *pertain to spiritual life/life in the Spirit*; they are *sovereignly distributed*; and they are *expressions of blessing*. When studied in their larger contexts, these terms lead to the following concise definition provided by Thomas Schreiner: **“I would define spiritual gifts as gifts of grace granted by the Holy Spirit which are designed for the edification of the church”** (*Spiritual Gifts*, 16). Or, a more comprehensive definition:

As all believers without exception are baptized with the Spirit at the moment of conversion (1 Cor 12:13), they all without exception receive supernatural endowments for service within the church according to the Spirit’s sovereign prerogative (1 Cor 12:4, 6-11). These spiritual gifts are not limited to only a select group of Christians. Since all believers are supernaturally gifted, they are all obligated to exercise their giftedness in ministry to others. (MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 800)

There are **at least eighteen different spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament**. In fact, no two gift-lists in the NT are identical; they always contain variations. This suggests that these lists were not intended to be *exhaustive* in nature. There may well be more gifts than those listed. But the biggest area of discussion among Christians is not the *number* of gifts listed, but the *duration* of those listed.

2. **“Continuationism.”** The view that *all* the gifts listed in the NT *continue* through the entire church age is called *continuationism*. Generally speaking, proponents of this view—called *continuationists*—**argue that there is no basis to believe that any of the gifts have ceased to operate in the church today**. However, among themselves, continuationists disagree over the nuancing of this definition. Three general perspectives exist:
  - (a) ***Absolute continuationists*** believe all the gifts operate today exactly as they did during the apostolic era—including the gift of apostleship possessed by men like the Apostles Peter and Paul. These are generally fringe charismatics who espouse the false gospel of the Word of Faith movement.
  - (b) ***Moderate continuationists*** believe either that all the gifts operate today, with the exception of the gift of apostleship; or that they all operate today, but some in a somewhat inferior way to how they operated in the apostolic era. This view is common among many Pentecostals and evangelical charismatics.
  - (c) ***Open-but-cautious continuationists*** believe that all the gifts *could* function today, but they are not all necessary; they believe none of the gifts have ceased in principle, but that they need not all be practiced in the church. This view is claimed by those who typically reject continuationism in practice, but allow for it in principle.

In reality, moderate and open-but-cautious continuationists are best labelled *inconsistent continuationists*. They recognize some kind of difference exists between the way gifts operate today and how they operated during the apostolic era, but they still consider them to be of the same essence.

3. **“Cessationism.”** The view of *cessationism* believes that some of the gifts described in the NT have definitively *ceased* and are no longer given by God to members of the church today. (The term “cessation” or “cessationism” is based off the word “cease.”) This view is advocated not out of a conviction that God has ceased to work directly in creation today. Rather, cessationism asserts that God no longer gives extraordinary, miraculous gifts to specific individuals in the church. MacArthur and Mayhue provide this definition:

*Cessationism* is the view that the sign gifts (e.g., the performing of miracles, gifts of healing, speaking in tongues) and the revelatory gifts (e.g., the reception and proclamation of new revelation from God) passed away when the foundation stage of the church ended. (*Biblical Doctrine*, 804)

Cessationists contend that all the gifts listed in the NT can be put into the following categories:

A CESSATIONIST CATEGORIZATION OF THE GIFTS			
Temporary, Miraculous Gifts (Extraordinary)		Permanent, Ministering Gifts (Ordinary)	
<i>Revelatory</i>	<i>Confirmatory</i>	<i>Expositional</i>	<i>Service</i>
Apostleship	Miracles	Teaching	Administration
Prophecy	Healing	Exhortation	Mercy
Etc.	Etc.	Etc.	Etc.

Jonathan Edwards, an advocate of the cessationist position, describes the difference as follows:

The extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, such as the gift of tongues, of miracles, of prophecy, etc., are called extraordinary because they are such as are not given in the ordinary course of God's providence. They are not bestowed in the way of God's ordinary providential dealing with his children, but only on extraordinary occasions, as they were bestowed on the prophets and apostles to enable them to reveal the mind and will of God before the canon of Scripture was complete, and so on the primitive Church, in order to the founding and establishing of it in the world. . . . But the ordinary gifts of the Spirit are such as are continued to the Church of God throughout all ages; such gifts as are granted in conviction and conversion, and such as appertain to the building up of the saints in holiness and comfort. (*Charity and Its Fruit*, chapter 2).

The main arguments in favor of cessationism can be summarized as follows:

- (a) **Cessationism is required by the purpose of the revelatory gifts.** Revelatory gifts (e.g., apostleship, prophecy) do not merely *rephrase* previous revelation; they *reveal* previously inaccessible knowledge. Revelatory gifts provided this new knowledge *to the church* when that knowledge was needed. Paul describes this in **Ephesians 2:20** when he describes the church as “having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone.”
- (b) **Cessationism is required by the purpose of the confirmatory gifts.** Confirmatory gifts (e.g., miracles, healings) served to authenticate the messengers of new revelation. The writer of **Hebrews 2:3-4** states, “After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will” (see also **2 Cor 12:12**).
- (c) **Cessationism is required by the comparison of the gifts of the NT with the so-called miraculous gifts today.** Continuationists either agree there are no apostles today, or redefine the gift of “**apostleship**” apart from NT criteria. Continuationists redefine “**prophecy**” apart from biblical criteria to allow for error and minimal authority. For example, Wayne Grudem—a continuationist—admits, “There is almost uniform testimony from all sections of the Charismatic Movement that today's prophecy is impure and will contain elements which are not to be obeyed or trusted.” Continuationists also redefine “**tongues**” to mean irrational utterances rather than human languages (contrary to Acts 2:6-11). Continuationists redefine “**healings**” to refer to non-dramatic, non-visible, non-instantaneous healings (contrary to the healings recorded of those who had the gift, e.g., Acts 20:9-12).

**“If a continuationist says that the gifts are operating today but to a far inferior degree than what we see in the New Testament, then they seem to be saying that the gifts aren't operating as they did in the New Testament.”**  
—Schreiner, *Spiritual Gifts*, 165

- (d) **Cessationism is consistent with the testimony of the church after the apostolic era.** The testimony of those church leaders who followed the apostles shows the consensus that certain gifts ceased when the apostles passed away.
- (e) **Cessationism is preferable to the serious problems created by continuationism today, evident in the charismatic movement.** While there are dishonorable proponents even of correct views, the charismatic movement is filled with an overabundance of defects traceable to its perspective on the spiritual gifts. According to J. I. Packer, these include: elitism, sectarianism, anti-intellectualism, illuminism, charismania, super-supernaturalism, eudaemonism, demon obsession, and conformism (*Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 155-59).

## B. Essential Characteristics

Assuming the position of cessationism, these characteristics are offered as part of a theology of the spiritual gifts:

1. **Spiritual gifts are imparted to all true believers.** This occurs the moment the new believer is “made to drink of the Spirit.” 1 Cor 12:12-13.

2. **Spiritual gifts are determined by God.** This implies that a believer cannot seek the particular gift he might prefer. It is given by God's sovereign freedom. Heb 12:4; 1 Cor 12:4-6, 11, 18 28; Eph 4:7-11.
3. **Spiritual gifts are undeserved.** They are never deserved; they never are "ours." They are gifts of grace. Rom 12:6; Eph 4:7.
4. **Spiritual gifts vary among believers.** 1 Cor 12:4-6, 12, 14, etc. Paul's favorite analogy when speaking of the gifts is that of the human body. There is complex diversity, yet it is one organism. So also is the church.
5. **Spiritual gifts are designed to benefit the church.** 1 Cor 12:7; 14:12, 26. Gifts are always *others-oriented*, and are never intended to serve the individual who possesses them. When practiced for the benefit of the self, they become carnal and destructive to the body of Christ.
6. **Spiritual gifts are not to be squandered.** 1 Pet 4:10. That each believer possess this spiritual enablement brings a serious responsibility and obligation. Every Christian, young or old, male or female, is needed for the health, growth, and unity of his or her church. The focus must not be, *What can I gain?* but *How can I contribute?*
7. **Spiritual gifts are not equal to spiritual character.** 1 Cor 13:1-3; Matt 7:21-23. Conformity to the likeness of Christ (Rom 8:29) is a superior calling than that of the mere practice of one's giftedness.
8. **Spiritual gifts are given to glorify God.** 1 Pet 4:11. The ultimate intention in our stewardship of this spiritual enablement must always be to make much of God, His glory, and the majesty of His plan of redemption.

### For Further Reflection

**Scripture Memory:** 1 Peter 4:10-11

**Recommended Reading:**

- MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pp. 379-386; 800-818.
- Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, chapter 2.
- Thomas Schreiner, *Spiritual Gifts: What They Are and Why They Matter* (beginner).
- John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos and Strange Fire*.
- Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*.
- The sermons preached at the 2013 *Strange Fire* conference, available online here: <https://www.gty.org/library/topical-series-library/325/strange-fire-conference>

**Homework:**

- Take time this week to read 1 Corinthians 12-14. What is the role of chapter 13? Why does Paul insert it in the middle of such an intense discussion about spiritual gifts?
- In your own words, define "continuationism" and "cessationism." How would you summarize the five arguments given above in defense of the cessationist position?
- Some Christians would argue that the debate between continuationists and cessationists is unimportant compared to the many more important issues plaguing the church. How would you respond? What is at stake in this debate?
- If you are in Christ, you have a special gifting given by the Holy Spirit which you must now steward for the good of the church and the glory of God. How are you employing that gifting for those purposes today?
- Do you consider yourself to be a good steward of what God has graciously given to you? Why/why not?
- If you are not serving in some way in the church today, consult with your group leader about the steps you need to take to contribute. Prayerfully, patiently, but proactively begin to implement that strategy asap.

**Hymns:** "Oh, How Good It Is" (*Hymns of Grace* #332); "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (#53)

**This Week's Audio:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next Meeting:** April 23 – "Preservation"