

8.31.25

“Understanding Spiritual Gifts”

1 Corinthians 12:1-7

“3 Things” – Cornerstone Introduction

Paul begins 1 Corinthians 12 with the statement: “Now concerning spiritual gifts...” You might remember the phrase “Now concerning” from Steven Schouten’s message on marriage and singleness, Pastor John Marc’s message on being single-minded, or Pastor Dan’s message on the “Loving Limits of Liberty.” This phrase informs us that Paul is introducing an important new topic, for which he will provide inspired instruction, given as part of his focus on matters of public worship begun in chapter 11 and continuing through chapter 14.

In these verses, Paul affirms that all genuine Christians are spiritually gifted, not just those with more obvious or public gifts, because everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord is filled with the Holy Spirit. Some in Corinth apparently coveted spiritual gifts for selfish reasons, but Paul makes it clear they are given by God **“for the common good.”** Though written to the Corinthian church, this passage is definitely relevant for Christians today, because there are still churches where certain members are considered more spiritual than others based on their supposed exercise of conspicuous spiritual gifts.

Please open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 12:1-7 now or follow on the screens as I read:

***Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.<sup>2</sup> You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the mute idols, however you were led.<sup>3</sup> Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus is accursed”; and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.***

***<sup>4</sup> Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.<sup>5</sup> And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord.<sup>6</sup> There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.<sup>7</sup> But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.***

Have you ever read a medical study stating that a certain human body part, such as the appendix or spleen, was actually unnecessary and useless? Sometimes evolutionary thinking says: “this part once served a purpose, but we have evolved past the need for it.” Researchers have recently found that these so-called “junk parts” may actually serve a specific purpose. Jeffrey Laitman, director of anatomy and functional morphology at New York’s Mount Sinai School of Medicine, says that history is littered with body parts once called “useless” simply because medical science had yet to understand them.

One recent study found that the spleen may play a critical role in healing damaged hearts. This kidney-shaped organ helps spot infections and filters out red blood cells that are damaged or old. It may even store monocytes, white blood cells essential for immune defense and tissue repair. But don’t worry if yours has been removed; you can definitely live without a spleen!

The most famous “junk” organ is the appendix. Bill Parker, assistant professor of surgery at Duke University Medical Center, says: "It's hard to figure out what the appendix does when you're studying super-clean animals and people." The appendix is a storehouse of beneficial bacteria that help us digest food. Because our modern food sources are so clean, this benefit is not needed like it was in ancient times. Once again, if your appendix was removed, there’s no cause for alarm!

What is the point of this little scientific detour? We were created by God, and every part of our bodies has a specific purpose designed by Him! Some parts serve a more *obvious* purpose, but all parts are necessary for the healthy functioning of the body – something we will discover in our passage from 1 Corinthians 12 about spiritual gifts and their importance to the Body of Christ! **Here is the MAIN POINT of our passage:**

**1 Corinthians 12:1-7 teaches three principles about spiritual gifts so that we will not promote self but serve and build up others for the glory of God.**

**1) Understand the Definition of Spiritual Gifts (v1-3)**

## **2) Appreciate the Diversity of Spiritual Gifts (v4-6)**

## **3) Follow the Design for Spiritual Gifts (v7)**

My prayer is that we will humbly thank God for the spiritual gifts He has given each of us, and use them for the good of other believers – to build up our brothers and sisters in Christ!

We will look first at verses 1-3, where Paul helps us:

### **I. Understand the Definition of Spiritual Gifts.**

Verse 1 reads: ***Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.***

As just mentioned, ***“Now concerning...”*** signals that Paul is beginning a new topic. The word ***“gifts”*** does not appear in the original Greek, which is why it appears in italics in our Bibles – if you have the New American Standard Bible 1995 edition – but it is clear from the verses that follow Paul is talking about spiritual gifts and not just spiritual things or spiritual people. By stating ***I do not want you to be unaware***, Paul stresses the importance of this subject, and that he wants the readers (and us) to pay close attention.

So, what are spiritual gifts? Well, in coming weeks we will discover many of the spiritual gifts given to believers described in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 and verse 28. But for now, here is a definition of spiritual gifts:

***“Spiritual gifts are God-given abilities through the Holy Spirit that equip believers to serve others, edify the church, and glorify Christ.”***

Spiritual gifts come from the Holy Spirit, not from human effort or natural talent – Pastor Dan just read 1 Peter 4:10, which says: ***“As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another.”***

We will see in verse 7 that every Christian receives at least one gift, and they are given “for the common good,” which as Paul says in Ephesians 4:12 is the

***“equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”***

That brings us to the problem in Corinth. Spiritual gifts, unfortunately, were not uniting the church in Corinth; they were dividing the church. Some of the Corinthians were placing such an excessive emphasis on showy displays of spirituality, particularly speaking in tongues, that it was disrupting the church's worship, dividing the church's fellowship, and demeaning the witness of the Gospel. Clearly, Paul's inspired correction was needed!

Verse 2 continues with: ***You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the mute idols, however you were led,*** reminding the Corinthians of their pagan history. Paul is contrasting their past experience as spiritually dead idol-worshippers with their present experience of new life in Christ. They were slaves to dead idols, but now belonged to the living God. Their idols never spoke to them, but God spoke to them by His Spirit, even speaking through them in the gift of prophecy. They were once led astray (“carried away”) and controlled by demons (1 Cor. 10:20), but are now filled with and led by the Spirit.

Paul makes this same contrast in Galatians 4:8-9 when he says: ***“However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. <sup>9</sup> But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?”***

After reminding the Corinthians of their former life of idol worship, Paul gives a test of true spirituality in verse 3. He says: ***Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus is accursed”; and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.*** It is only through the Holy Spirit that a person can honestly and sincerely say, “Jesus is Lord.”

David Prior says: *“The burning desire of the Holy Spirit to glorify Jesus is Paul's overall criterion of genuineness in the matter of spirituality.”*

At first, it's a bit tricky to follow Paul's transition from verse 2 to verse 3 – from talk of idol worship to a warning not to say “Jesus is accursed.” Paul is not sharing random, disconnected thoughts! He often speaks to both Jews and Greeks, such as stating that he preached Christ crucified to **“both Jews and Greeks”** in 1 Corinthians 1:23-24. In verses 2-3, Paul is speaking both to Greeks who formerly worshipped idols, and to Jews who formerly rejected Jesus as the Messiah. His point is that only a person who has repented of their sins and yielded their life to Jesus *as Lord* is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Some Corinthians pointed to outward displays of spiritual gifts as proof of the Holy Spirit's presence. Paul corrects them, clarifying that the true evidence of the Spirit's presence and activity in a Christian's life is the exaltation of Jesus as Lord, which results in loving concern for others. Paul identifies that which qualifies a person as genuinely *spiritual*: It is not boasting about the impressiveness of a spiritual gift, but acknowledging that the purpose of every gift is to bring glory, honor, and praise to Jesus Christ! In fact, Paul reminds us in Romans 11:36 that this is the true purpose of our lives, when he says: **“For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”**

Paul's main purpose in this introduction to spiritual gifts is not to condemn the ignorance of either Greeks or Jews. He is clarifying that any person who utters the confession “Jesus is Lord” – not just mouthing the words, but sincerely yielding to the Lordship of Jesus, is, as one author says, *“living in the sphere of the Holy Spirit's power.”* So what about you? Is Jesus your Lord? Are you walking in the power of the Holy Spirit? Do you understand that He has gifted you to serve others for their good and for the glory of God?

Growing up, I attended church every Sunday. I recited Scripture, sang hymns of praise, and tried to do good works. I attended confirmation classes to learn about the Bible, church history, and Christian doctrine. But none of this made me a “spiritual” person, because I had not yet surrendered to Jesus Christ as Lord, repenting of my sins and trusting in Christ alone for forgiveness. That happened when I was 13; I heard the Gospel, was convicted of my sins, which had separated me from God, and I put my trust in the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

I finally understood that He bore my sins in His sinless body (1 Peter 2:24), enabling me to die to sin and live for righteousness. When the Lord accomplished this work of redemption in me through faith in Christ, He filled me with His Spirit. Now, like every Christian, I am “spiritual,” not because of anything I have done, but because God supernaturally saved me and filled me with His Spirit!

Have you tried to become “spiritual” through your own efforts? Many people seek to be spiritual by attending religious services, meditating, practicing “mindfulness,” reciting chants, burning incense, or depriving themselves of certain comforts. None of these things will make you “spiritual.” Being truly spiritual only comes from being a child of God who is filled with His Spirit! If you have never turned from your sins and put your trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and *Lord* – the perfect Son of God Who died on the cross in your place for your sins (quote 2 Cor. 5:21) - I plead with you to trust in Christ today. You will be ***“reconciled to God through the death of His Son”*** (Rom. 5:10), and He will send his Spirit into your heart, for you will now be His son or daughter (Gal. 4:6).

After clarifying that all true Christians are spiritual, because they have yielded to Jesus Christ as Lord and received His Spirit, verses 4-6 teach us to:

## II. Appreciate the Diversity of Spiritual Gifts

Paul makes three brief statements regarding spiritual gifts in verses 4-6:

***<sup>4</sup>Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. <sup>5</sup>And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. <sup>6</sup>There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.***

Notice Paul uses the word ***“varieties”*** three times. “Varieties” can also be translated “allotments” or “distributions” because the root verb means “to distribute.” This indicates that *God determines* who receives various spiritual gifts, distributing them according to His sovereign purposes, not because some Christians are more deserving of certain gifts than others. Based on Paul’s comments to the Corinthian church, it appears that they inappropriately valued

speaking in tongues above all other gifts. One author says, *“Spiritual gifts are not a ‘badge of spirituality,’ but a ‘mark of grace.’”*

We also notice that Paul attributes the giving of spiritual gifts to the Holy Spirit (v4), the Lord (v5 – indicating Jesus), and God (v6)? This is intentional, and it points to the Trinitarian nature of spiritual gifts: God the Father has given us the gift of God the Son for our salvation. God the Son has given us God the Holy Spirit for our sanctification, and God the Holy Spirit has given us spiritual gifts for our service to others.

But why are “gifts” attributed to the Spirit, “ministries” to Christ, and “effects” to God? David Garland suggests that “gifts” (or “grace-gifts”) are attributed to the Spirit, because as verse 7 says, spiritual gifts are ***“manifestations of the Spirit.”*** “Ministries” are attributed to Jesus, perhaps because Paul just taught on the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 11, revealing that Christ’s perfect sacrifice for our sins is the greatest ministry of all time! “Effects” (or “workings”) are attributed to God the Father, implying that everything accomplished by a believer is achieved through God’s power.

Paul is not suggesting that the three persons of the Trinity work separately to distribute different kinds of gifts, but that the rich variety of spiritual gifts given to believers reflects God’s Triune nature as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We can even see a progression in verses 4-6: *“There is no divine “spiritual gift” which does not bring with it a task (a “ministry”), and there is no “ministry” which does not move us to take action (“effects” or “workings”).*

We learn three important truths from verses 4-6:

- 1) Paul’s purpose in listing spiritual gifts this way is to reinforce the “variety” of gifts.
- 2) Paul affirms that all spiritual gifts come from the same divine Source – our Triune God.
- 3) Paul is broadening the Corinthians’ understanding of spiritual gifts to include humbler forms of expression such as acts of service, not just sensational gifts!

An important aspect of understanding and using our spiritual gifts is submitting to God's sovereignty and accepting the gifts He has *chosen* for us. A heart yielded to Jesus as Lord considers it a privilege to use *any* spiritual gift to bless others! On the other hand, if we take pride in our spiritual gifts, we will envy the gifts that God has given to others.

The distribution of spiritual gifts could be compared to a restaurant where the chef knows all of his customers extremely well, and decides what meal is best for them. All of the meals are made by the same chef, but *he* wisely decides what is best suited for each customer.

To summarize: Spiritual "gifts" are distributed to "minister" to those in God's church in different ways, producing different "effects" according to His will.

We can apply this truth by being *grateful* for the spiritual gifts God has chosen for us, humbly using them to serve others. Jesus says in Matthew 23:11-12 – ***But the greatest among you shall be your servant. <sup>12</sup> Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.***

We must be willing to serve where we are NEEDED, not where we are NOTICED.

Now that we Understand the Definition of Spiritual Gifts (they are given to those who submit to Jesus as Lord), and Appreciate the Diversity of Spiritual Gifts (God sovereignly distributes gifts to accomplish His perfect will), verse 7 teaches us to:

### III. Follow the Design for Spiritual Gifts

***But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.***

In verse 7, Paul gives the thesis statement for chapter 12, explaining that the Holy Spirit works in every Christian, but He works *differently* in each one. Because some Corinthians claimed exclusive privilege or status based on their exercise of certain gifts, Paul corrects their pridefulness by teaching that *God alone* distributes spiritual gifts to all Christians so that they are equipped to minister to other believers.

Paul modeled serving others with his gifts. In 1 Corinthians 11:1 (which Steven preached on several weeks ago), Paul says to imitate him as he imitates Christ,



and Acts 20:19 says that Paul's example was: ***"serving the Lord with all humility."*** Jesus is our perfect example; though He possesses ***"all the fullness of Deity"*** in bodily form (Col. 2:9), yet He ***"did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many"*** (Matthew 20:28).

Verse 7 gives no reason for us to take credit for spiritual gifts God has chosen for us. The verb *didōmi*, translated "is given," implies our *absolute dependence* on God's indwelling Spirit. He is the source of our spiritual gifts, not us. They are provided by the grace of God, and they are empowered by the Spirit of God. Spiritual gifts are not just glorified natural abilities or talents. Not something you achieve with schooling or practice or inheritance. Spiritual gifts are supernatural endowments through which God enables you to serve others.

After becoming a Christian at age 13, I attended a charismatic church for several years. People were encouraged to exercise the "sign gifts" such as speaking in tongues and prophesying. Those who claimed to practice these gifts were considered the most spiritual ones in the church. Unfortunately, I saw some using their "gifts" to exercise spiritual authority over others in unhealthy ways. I was once informed by a woman that the Lord spoke to her in a dream and disclosed that I was supposed to marry her daughter. Thankfully, a wise friend encouraged me not to take her comment seriously. Apparently, she was known for making off-the-wall predictions. As an immature Christian, I prayed to receive one of the flashy gifts because I wanted to seem more spiritual, but my desire for those gifts was motivated by selfishness and pride. I didn't understand what this passage teaches: that spiritual gifts are sovereignly distributed by God so that we will serve others, not ourselves!

Verse 7 gives a simple outline to help us understand the purpose and application of spiritual gifts. We can see three important points:

**First**, Paul says ***"to each one is given,"*** meaning Every believer has a spiritual gift, imparted at the moment of conversion.

Spiritual gifts are not given arbitrarily, like flipping a coin or drawing lots. They are distributed under the sovereign control of the Holy Spirit. Just as every Christian has received the grace of God through salvation, every Christian has also received a spiritual gift. No Christian has every gift, but every Christian has at least one spiritual gift. No Christian should ever say, “God can’t use me,” or “This church doesn’t need me.” Every Christian is a minister who takes part in fulfilling the ministries of the church as they exercise their spiritual gifts and minister to one another.

Isn’t it encouraging that God chose a spiritual gift especially for you? Do you know what your spiritual gift is? If not, pray for God to reveal the nature of your gift and show you how to use it to serve others, and listen to upcoming sermons that will bring insights into the different gifts. Just for the record – and yes, I have struggled with this myself - there is no spiritual gift of “criticism!”

**Second**, Paul says gifts are a ***“manifestation of the Spirit”*** – Every gift is given and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The dictionary definition of “manifestation” is *“an action which embodies something,”* or in this case, Someone: the Holy Spirit. When we exercise our spiritual gift, we allow others to see Christ working in and through us! According to Galatians 2:20, since we have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer we who live, but *Christ lives in us!*

Spiritual gifts remind us that we can only serve God in the power of His Spirit. Jesus said, ***“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing”*** (John 6:63). We cannot manufacture either the right motivation or ability to please God and serve others; only the Holy Spirit can equip us to build up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12). Let’s remember to thank God daily for His Spirit, Who gave us a gift that enables us to minister to others in His Name (Eph. 3:16).

**Third**, Paul says that spiritual gifts are ***“for the common good”*** – the use of your spiritual gift is for the good of the Body of Christ.

Why doesn't the Holy Spirit give every Christian all the gifts, or why doesn't He give every Christian the same gift? The intention of the Holy Spirit is found in verse 7. The word for "common good" implies "to bring together" or "to join together." In other words, God has made us different so that he can unite us as the body of Christ. Our various gifts show that we are like a puzzle made up of different pieces. When we exercise our gifts within the local church, we find that we fit together perfectly and create a beautiful representation of the family of God.

Well, back to supposedly useless body parts...one more thought to be extraneous was the thymus gland. It was believed to be useless after childhood until a research team discovered it plays a vital role in supporting the immune system. It produces specific T cells and B lymphocytes that other organs don't. The T cells, for example, travel to lymph nodes and organs, helping the immune system fight against allergens, infections, tumors, and other diseases. Once again, we see that God has a *purpose* for every part of the body!

The Holy Spirit, in His divine wisdom and sovereignty, has given each of us precisely the gift, or gifts, that will enable us to serve most effectively in the body of Christ. Don't neglect the gift God has given you (1 Tim. 4:14), but use it to build up your brothers and sisters in Christ as you have the opportunity. God has given you a *unique* gift and has great plans for you to use it for the common good, for the benefit of others!

You may not *feel* very spiritual, but remember that by **definition** you *are* spiritual, because as a Christian, the Holy Spirit lives in you! Also, remember there are **diverse** spiritual gifts, and God has chosen the perfect gift for you. Finally, remember that God's **design** is for you to use your gift for the "common good" – He has given you a unique gift ***"for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ."*** (Eph. 4:12-13)

Let's pray.