



GRACE CHURCH

The Gifts of the Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:1-13

Grace Church | 5.21.23

I'm sure at least some of you know that these days there is a free software called chatGPT, an artificial intelligence bot, that can not only talk to you about anything you'd like, but also produce decent paragraphs, papers, even sermons. This realization is simultaneously scary and intriguing, but also I think a little bit sad. See, there is nothing more soul-sucking than doing a job a robot could do.

Everyone wants to be useful, to contribute to society in some way. To make something beautiful or useful or meaningful. We were made for this and we were redeemed for this. It's why we go to school and get degrees, or move from job to job to find that one that we are actually kind of good at. Usefulness is built into our DNA, when God created mankind he said: be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth with good things. And nothing kills our sense of usefulness quite like monotony. It's why we get increasingly less humane and less alive when we don't have anything meaningful or beautiful to focus on. The moment we become robots is the moment we become boring and useless.

Did you know that the Holy Spirit not only gives us life, new life in Christ, indwells us, calls us, communes with us, and assures us of our faith, but also makes us fundamentally *not boring*? It's true: to be filled with the Spirit, we see in our text today, is to be given unique, non-robotic, personalized giftings, powerful usefulness, for God's kingdom. They are called spiritual gifts, and they are the texture, the beauty, the art of being filled with the Holy Spirit. And they are also confusing and often mysterious.

It's ok if you feel uninformed about spiritual gifts. Paul tells us that we can remedy some of that today in **verse 1**. We are all bringing different experiences into this. This text speaks about tongues—I'll never forget one of the first international trips I went on, when a group from a certain church after worship one night all started praying for one another and me in some sort of strange utterance and inconsistent (incoherent?) language I could not understand. This text speaks of prophecy—I'll never forget when a worship leader at a prominent church at the time had come to speak to a group of us about leading worship and told me, in front of everyone, that he had a word from God that I would be a leader in the fashion industry (still waiting).

Perhaps your experiences with the exercise of some of the gifts described in this passage has been negative, and you've felt pressured or second-class because of your lack of spiritual expression. Or maybe you have had generally positive experience, and you wish more of your brothers and sisters



at this church could understand your perspective and operate in some of these gifts more openly. Maybe you are just confused, or maybe, as I often feel, you are just a little apathetic. It's ok if you feel uninformed about spiritual gifts. But ignorance is not next to Godliness. Like Paul, I don't want you to be uninformed.

So here is how this morning is going to go. I don't want us to be informed primarily through our experiences. I want us to be informed through God's Word. So in order to do my best at *informing* you, we will be focused on teaching through the questions of this text (particularly the first): 1) What are the gifts of the Spirit?; 2) Who receives the gifts of the Spirit?; 3) Where do the gifts of the Spirit come from?; and 4) Why are the gifts of the Spirit given?

What are the gifts of the Spirit?

A variety of service-oriented spiritual empowerments or skilful manifestations of God's presence.

We get some help in defining spiritual gifts from the different ways Paul uses the idea in **verse 4-7**. First, he says there are *varieties*. This list is not exhaustive. At other parts of Scripture he will mention certain gifts that are not included here. But I don't think we profit much by trying to nail down an exhaustive list of spiritual gifts. The best gifts are unique, thoughtful, and meaningful to the individual. And these are from God—he is the best gift-giver. That means, in some sense, no two spiritual gifts are the same. They are entirely diverse: Paul is just giving his best stab at linking some together that he has seen.

Notice two he calls them “service”, which tells us something about their purpose we will get to in a moment, but also calls them “activities” or “workings”. This helps us see that Spiritual gifts are not just personality traits or unique skills. I don't think, for example, that juggling or knitting is a spiritual gift. Rather, spiritual gifts are acts of service—they aren't entertainment, hobbies, or meant for making money—and they are empowered by the Holy Spirit. In other words, they require the Holy Spirit, they are “unnatural” in that it would be impossible for one who is not filled with the Holy Spirit to carry them out. Now, they are “skillful”, I think they have actual precision and uniqueness, but how do you know a spiritual gift from some sort of other skill?

A spiritual gift is, **verse 7**, a manifestation of the Spirit. Meaning, all spiritual gifts uniquely testify to God's presence, they prove that God is there. Another example: I don't think playing the Tuba is a spiritual gift—but the unique gift given by God to lead others into an experience of God's presence through music, in a way you would not be able to do without the Spirit of God? Maybe. Although you might be better served by calling it Tubular “exhortation” than “the spiritual gift of Tuba”. The point is that I think we are better served by recognizing that God works through all of us in unique and various ways—and opening ourselves up to the work of the Spirit and asking God to use us as he will—rather than trying to pin down and define what all of our spiritual gifts are.



But we are also served by taking special note of the categories Scripture lays before us. This will help us understand how God works in unique and supernatural ways for the benefit of his church. So let's go through some of these gifts. I'll also give some practicality as to how to avoid using these gifts.

Utterance of wisdom/knowledge

I lump these together because I believe that is what Paul is doing in the text—both are “utterances”, also translated as “words”. In Scriptural language, wisdom and knowledge also often go together as an expression of the fullness of truth, as in Colossians 2:3, “in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”. I think it most likely that Paul here is primarily referring to the spiritual gift of teaching, something missing from this list but he speaks of at the end of the chapter and in every other spiritual gift list. He also has spent lots of time in 1 Corinthians linking the concept of “wisdom” to the “message of the cross”, as well as in other places referring to the Word of God as “the word of truth” or the “word of faith”, meaning he uses that word “word” (here translated as utterances) to refer to teaching.¹

I suppose it could refer to some sort of special knowledge or wisdom given by the Spirit, but we find in Scripture that wisdom and knowledge are nearly always linked to God's word and the message of Christ. Suffice it to say that there are those in the church who will be gifted to speak and teach God's Word in ways that are uniquely both wise and knowledgeable, and this comes directly from the Spirit of God.

The gift of teaching is a gift we might see more commonly, but we still need to be discerning and wise about it. We need to call out both men and women to use this gift well. But I think it is safe to say that if no one is acknowledging you as a teacher, you may not be operating in this gift at this time, and that is ok. But there is nothing worse or even potentially more dangerous than a teacher who is teaching God's word not from the overflow of the Spirit, but simply in their own strength.

Extraordinary faith

I say “extraordinary” because it's not saving faith in view here, but the faith that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 “that can move mountains”. This isn't simply a disposition towards belief and away from doubt or skepticism. This means that in unique times and ways, God gives special, extraordinary, unexplainable faith to those who have every reason to doubt. That is a great gift from the Spirit. A warning that blind optimism is not the gift of faith. Faith holds to God's promises—it doesn't rush headlong into foolishness.

Alright, pause. The next three on this list we must admit are far less common in our spiritual experience. And I think we have to account for that. Typically the way to account for this is by dividing some spiritual gifts into the “miraculous” ones or the “charismatic” ones. “Charismatic” just means gifts, and I see no distinguishing like this in Scripture, so I'm not sure this is helpful. But

¹ Schriener, *1 Corinthians*



generally the argument for why we do not see as many of these kinds of gifts goes something like one of a few ways:

1. These gifts are alive and active in the church today, but we don't see many of them because we do not pursue them or have faith to operate in them.
2. These gifts are alive and active today, but their frequency depends on the contextual need for a more miraculous confirmation of the gospel message.
3. These gifts were especially for the establishment of the church and the confirmation of the gospel in the apostolic age, and some or all of them have ceased to be given once that age is complete.

All of these positions are valid and I think in part scripturally defensible. I would warn you against #1, simply because of what we have seen in the text so far: **A lack of spiritual gifts is not necessarily a sign of a lack of faith.** Concluding that we should just pray more or have more faith could lead towards an unhealthy obsession with the acquiring of certain spiritual gifts or an unhealthy elevation of some spiritual gifts to special status, which is *exactly* what the Corinthians are being reprimanded of by Paul. However, the scripture does call us to eagerly pursue spiritual gifts (14:1) and seems to say that they will be given in accordance with our maturity, since God wants us to be wise and orderly in how they are used.

I think it is most likely that the infrequency of some spiritual gifts is not due to a lack of faithfulness, but rather the sovereign hand of God to give the church what is needed at the right time. I do want you to notice the unique nature of the early church. Just because thousands aren't being saved by our sermons or being added to our number daily like in Acts doesn't also mean we are unfaithful. Just because we don't have awakening every time we come to church doesn't mean we are unfaithful. I find it quite interesting that in Acts as the church is being formed by the apostles, miracles are amazingly frequent. But in 1-2 Timothy and Titus, the instructions of Paul to the second generation of church leaders for church health, we are never pointed to miracles and wonders but rather to the normal supernatural work of preaching, teaching, discipleship, and sound doctrine. What I really am saying is this: do not dismiss the possibility of the abnormal work of God, but by all means do not despise the normal work of God. Both are from the Holy Spirit, and I think we can trust God in faith to pursue him, seek him, and pray that he will give us what we need at the time we need it.

Healing/Miracles

Sometimes God sees fit to confirm the validity of his presence with unexplainable healings or miracles. I don't think this refers to doctors using their intellect and God given skills to bring healing. I think this refers to healing that would have never happened unless God spontaneously intervened. Again remember that God is sovereign in this: you will not experience more healing by something you do—God is the one healing, not you or your righteousness or piety. There is a link though I believe, between supernatural faith and healing. Sometimes God gifts some of us to



believe for something the rest of us deem impossible. At the same time, sometimes it takes more supernatural faith to believe in the resurrection of the dead to come, or the salvation of one far from God, than to believe in the healing of someone's body now.

Prophecy/Discernment

I will readily admit this is the one I am most skeptical about, simply because there is not a mountain of evidence in Scripture to tell us exactly what Paul means by "prophecy". Clearly it was going on in the NT church by both men and women. I spoke to something like 6-7 people in our church this week, and all of them gave me slightly different answers to the question: what is the gift of prophecy? But I think after some study, there are at least four views. All of them view prophecy as spontaneous and from God in the moment, and in need of discernment or testing, which is what Paul speaks of as the "distinguishing of spirits".

- 1) Special insight to address a specific situation that ultimately builds up/encourages another.
- 2) Unique discernment of the needs of the church, calling the church or people back to faithfulness.
- 3) Preaching the truth of the Scripture in a uniquely specific and powerful way.
- 4) An authoritative and infallible word from God for the people of God through a human spokesperson.

I don't believe #3 is very scripturally defensible. To be blunt, there just aren't enough connections in scripture to prophecy and what the NT defines as preaching. If you are convinced by #4, which is the understanding of prophecy in the Old Testament and seems to generally be the view in the New, then you also will be led to believe that the gift of prophecy has likely ended with the last of the apostles or with the inspiration of the canon of Scripture (the books of the Bible). Since we now have the authoritative Word of God in the Scripture, we wouldn't need new infallible (unable to fail, perfect) words from God. This understanding of prophecy is actually the majority position of the church up until about 100 years ago, and I find it very convincing personally. If this is your view, you also likely see something like #1 and #2 as real instances of the Spirit working, but more like "impressions" of the Spirit and not exactly what Paul is talking about in the text.

But there is room together in our church for those who are not convinced by #4, and there are likely plenty of us in the room like that. In that case, I want to encourage you to operate in this gifting as you are called by God. Please do so with discernment and wisdom, in accordance to God's word, but do not be afraid to speak with unique wisdom and clarity the truth of God to the heart of another. One example I was given this week was of a woman who once felt called by God to speak to her daughter about a crossroads in her life. She said she had a picture of a staircase, and her exhortation, using God's word, was that her daughter needed to keep climbing or risk falling down if she lost faith. Another example I was given is of a family that spends the morning of



birthdays in their family praying together for the person whose birthday it is and asking God for unique wisdom and instruction in their life to give to them. Whether you believe these examples are prophesy or just spiritual impressions and special wisdom—it's clear that if they are done in a way that honors the Lord, and alongside discernment, they should be encouraged as spiritual gifts from God.

Tongues/Interpretation

Lastly, the gift that tripped up the Corinthian church. Commonly among Christian, tongues either refers to:

- 1) The speaking of real, discernable languages unknown to the person speaking them, used primarily in public setting of evangelism.
- 2) The speaking of real and “heavenly” or unknown, but with some discernable code or features.
- 3) The speaking of real and heavenly languages, as well as ecstatic (non discernable) utterances “in the Spirit”.

For the sake of time, I will say that #3 is by far the least Biblically defensible, and I believe perhaps the most dangerous, since it is uninterpretable (and 1 Corinthians makes it clear interpretation is necessary) and also has the tendency to be driven by emotion and social pressure. I am inclined to believe Paul has in mind #1, since we have clear examples in Scripture of a situation where earthly, discernable languages were spoken (Pentecost), but we do not have any scriptural examples of heavenly (unknown by none but the interpreter) languages being interpreted.

Who receives the gifts of the Spirit?

Every believer who professes Christ as Lord.

Here we breathe and recognize that it is incredibly good news that there are such incredible gifts available to us. But there is sometimes a danger in calling one another to turn our eyes to what is spiritual. We also can make *spirituality* the marker of identity, not the Holy Spirit.

This is exactly what happened to the church in Corinth. In their culture, to be close to the divine naturally would bring about all sorts of strange spiritual phenomena, so it wasn't uncommon for the local priests of the local deity to throw themselves around, speak in an unintelligible, frenzied manner, and claim to perform signs and wonders. So the people of Corinth turn to Christ, receive the Holy Spirit, and they notice that some within the Church have unusual gifts: they speak in different languages, they stand up to teach with authority and winsomeness, they pray and others are healed. Surely, they believe, the expression of such spiritual power is a sign of true closeness to God. To do these things is the sign of a “spirit-filled” person.

But what the text is teaching us is something entirely different. In **verses 2-3** we are shown how to identify those who are spiritual. Previously, Paul says to the Corinthians, you worshiped mute idols. That is important—although they appeared to have power, like the magicians of Egypt did



signs before Pharaoh—in the end they were mute, they could not really speak, they were just idols, not God. The marker of the Holy Spirit is not that crazy things happen, rather, as **verse 3** shows, that Jesus is glorified as Lord. How do you know if someone is filled with the Holy Spirit? If they confess (and here it does not just mean with their mouths but with their lives and actions) that Jesus is Lord, that he has control, if they bend the knee to Jesus.

The Corinthians were obviously obsessed with spiritual gifts, particularly the gift of tongues, speaking in languages unknown to the speaker. In the next few chapters Paul will devote plenty of space to helping them realize that the presence of tongues is not *necessarily* a marker of the Spirit. The true marker of the Spirit is lives and lips who profess the Lordship of Jesus, even if they do not speak in tongues.

Which leads us to a very vital conclusion. The presence or absence of any spiritual gift in your life is not a sign of your superiority or deficiency. Who receives the Holy Spirit? It's those who bow the knee to Jesus, it's *every* Christian. We see this again in **verse 7**, "to *each* is given". Everyone receives the Spirit, everyone is gifted. There are no extra spiritual Christians. This also means there is not some second baptism of the Holy Spirit that you must receive in order to level up your Christianity, nor is a lack of any spiritual gift a sign that you lack faith. Jesus wasn't crucified, buried, and brought to life so that some of us could be supercharged spiritual lions and some of us could be timid spiritual mice. He died and rose so that we could all be given exactly what we need to live like Christ is Lord.

Where do the gifts of the Spirit come from?

The sovereign will of the unified, Triune God.

I want you to notice that in our church we come from a lot of different church backgrounds. Some of us are former pentecostals, some of us grew up Presbyterian, Methodist, Southern Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran. It's actually quite surprising when you think about it. What binds us together?

There are many ways to answer this question, but I love the way this text answers it. The reason we are unified is simple: because God is unified. The reason we are unified is because God is one in three persons. Notice as the text starts to talk about diversity, it stresses the unity and singularity of God. **Verse 4**, there is the same Spirit, **verse 5**, we have the same Lord, which is Jesus the Son, and **verse 6**, it is the same God, that is the Father. In other words, the gifts are gifts from the Father, Son, and the Spirit, and we do not receive numerous gifts from several sources but we receive numerous gifts from *one* source. *Every* Christian, regardless of what they look like or how they act or their customs or their gifts, **verse 13**, share *one* Spirit. Christ is not divided, the Spirit is not divided.

The temptation when it comes to spiritual gifting is that we all want to do impressive, great things for God. But look at **verse 11**, it comes by the will of God. You don't get to decide the tools with which you are working with. You don't get to apportion to yourself what you think would work best dependent on your personality or preference. Which means that although there might be a



great difference in your mind between the way God uses the person sitting next to you and you, you don't get a say in the matter. The way to embrace the work of the Spirit in your life is to start by acknowledging that God knows how to use you better than you do.

This reality helps us also to understand that the Spiritual gifts should not be primarily seen as static character traits. You may be given a gift for a time, and notice that in another time and space it is no longer needed. When God needs a work of healing done, he gifts one of his own to do it at the needed time. A spiritual gift is not something that you possess—it's given when it is needed in the sovereign will of God.

So what is the common denominator of our church body (from different ecclesial backgrounds, culture, ages, interests)? The Spirit. And his gifts give *texture*. There is real difference to our unity. But your identity is found in the Spirit, not in your Spiritual gifts. On a business card, you might put your name and your title, which often serves to remind people of your skills or gifting. On your bio or linkedin or resume, you put your skills. What is the calling card, the business card of the Christian say? It does not say "gifted teacher", "skilled administrator" or "known for miraculous healing". It simply says "filled with the Spirit".

Why are the gifts of the Spirit given?

To confirm God's presence and meet the needs of the church.

Let's end on this point. We have already acknowledged that the gifts are acts of service, and that they are "manifestations" of God's presence. But I want to end by calling you again to **verse 7**. The gifts are not for you. They are for the good of the church.

Often the church is called the household of God in Scripture. In a household, there are a lot of chores to be had. And all of us want to be useful. I'll never forget those moments where my toddler recognized for the first time that there were things that *he* could do to help mommy and daddy. He was so proud, so joyful. All of us want to be useful. God doesn't need us. But Christ died for us, in our place, to bring us into God's house as his sons and daughters. He doesn't need us, but he wants to use us. He uses us for one another, not because we are impressive, but because he knows that there is immense joy found in being about the Father's work.

Jesus died, rose, and ascended to God so that he could send his Spirit. And his Spirit is not stingy, but gives various, unique gifts to all in Christ, empowering them and manifesting God through them. This means that there is work in God's house that only you can do. You are not boring. You are useful, you have texture, you are the artwork of God, his very handiwork. Trust his gifts, and use what you have for the good of the church and the glory of God.

