

Who's More Spiritual? 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

We now come up to a section in the book of 1 Corinthians that addresses spiritual gifts. This is an area that is so important for the growth and health of the church but can also become divisive and disruptive if there isn't clear understanding and spiritual maturity related to the use of the gifts. And that's what was happening in the church in Corinth. The Lord had richly blessed them with a variety of spiritual gifts but because of their lack of knowledge and maturity and the corrupting influence of their former worldview in idol worship, they were falling into error.

So Paul devoted three chapters to their issues related to spiritual gifts. He gives them some basic teaching, reminds them of what's most important, and gives some practical instruction to promote orderliness in worship. Today we are going to look at some of his basic teaching at the beginning of chapter 11.

To give us a framework to understand where he's coming from, I want us to think about what characteristics we think make a person more spiritual or more connected to God than others. It could be a lot of things... We might think someone is more spiritual because they know a lot about the Bible and have a lot of verses memorized. Or maybe they say things like "amen" and "hallelujah." Maybe they pray in public and with boldness or say a lot of Christian things on social media. We might think someone is more connected to God if they raise their hands when they're singing, or they have a leadership position in church, or don't seem to struggle with common human vices. It could be a lot of things. These tend to be the qualities we value in the church, while other qualities are neglected.

In the church of Corinth they thought people were more spiritual if they exhibited unusual behavior and speech in a worship setting. I learned from Leon Morris' commentary on 1 Corinthians that in their former pagan worldview *"it was universally accepted that some people, who were in specially close touch with the divine, had special spiritual endowments. At times they behaved in unpredictable ways, threw themselves about, spoke in a frenzied manner, and so on. Their 'enthusiasm' was the mark of the presence of the divine spirit within them."* We see a similar attitude today in tribal villages when it comes to shamans and witch doctors. Things can get pretty crazy.

That's what the Corinthians believed when they were still idol worshippers, and after becoming Christians they thought that way as well about people in the church. Leon Morris notes that *"Some people manifested unusual spiritual gifts. They did things like speak in a tongue they did not understand. And to many early believers this kind of thing was preeminently the mark of a 'spiritual' person."* So people who manifested these kinds of unusual behaviors were seen as more spiritual or more connected to God and those kinds of things became the most desirable qualities to seek after and experience when gathered for worship while other qualities were devalued and neglected. It was creating disorder and imbalance in the church.

So Paul provides them with some basic teaching and correction to counteract their problems. Today we're going to look at the first things he has to say that may also help correct some misconceptions we have about spiritual gifts.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-3.

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. ² You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. ³ Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.

The way he starts out is to address the topic of spiritual things. "Gifts" is not in the original Greek, but he probably had spiritual people and spiritual manifestations in mind based on the context. He tells them he doesn't want them to be uninformed. He reminds them that before they became followers of Jesus they were given over and led astray by mute or dumb idols. The idols they worshipped had no ability to convey truth to them, therefore they had no way of knowing the truth about spiritual things. The things they picked up from their pagan background were not helpful whatsoever, including the idea that erratic and ecstatic behavior was the telltale sign of being spiritual. So Paul didn't want them to be uninformed.

The first thing he teaches them in verse 3 is that when it comes to spiritual things, no one speaking in the Spirit of God is ever going to say, "Jesus is accursed." The Holy Spirit would never say that or lead someone to say that. Instead, if the Holy Spirit is in a person, they will say "Jesus is Lord." That's what comes from the Spirit of God. People without the Spirit of God won't proclaim "Jesus is Lord,"

because the only way a person can truly believe and proclaim that is if the Holy Spirit is in them. So point #1 is: when it comes to the working of the Spirit in people's lives, Jesus Christ will always be honored as Lord. He will never be cursed, which is something in their situation that could happen among devout Jews or pagan idol worshippers trying to lead the Christians astray.

Point #2 is in the next few verses. Like I said before, because of their former worldview they believed there were a few "spiritual" people who could be identified by erratic and ecstatic behavior and utterances. That was leading them to think that people who spoke in tongues were more spiritual and important than others. But the truth is something much different than that, and Paul lays the foundation of that truth in these verses.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-7.

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

So the manifestations of the Spirit are not limited to a few unusual behaviors and utterances. Paul says there are a variety of gifts that come from the same Spirit; there are a variety of ways people use those gifts in service and ministry to the Lord; and there are a variety of activities or workings that result and God is at work empowering all of them. The gifts, services, and activities that are spiritual are many, and we'll see that they not only include some unusual manifestations, but many that we might see as more 'normal.'

Paul also points out in verse 7 that these manifestations of the Spirit are not just limited to a select few people in the church, they are given to each and every person for the common good. The Holy Spirit works through every believer who has been born of the Spirit. It isn't just a few who are "spiritual." Everyone in the church has been given the manifestation of the Spirit in various ways for the good of the church.

So there are a variety of spiritual manifestations that are given to every person who is born of the Spirit – man, woman, child, older, younger, taller, shorter, abled, disabled – EVERYONE has been gifted by the Spirit, called by Christ into

ministry, and empowered by God to have a significant place and influence in the church in a variety of ways. He lists some of those ways in the following verses...

Read 1 Corinthians 12:8-11.

⁸For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

We have a spiritual gifts test in our church bookstore that you can use to help you identify what your gifts are and I want to use some of the definitions from that organization to describe these gifts. These are not all the gifts – other passages in Scripture point out different ones. These are just the ones that Paul felt were important for the church in Corinth to see. (full definitions at: spiritualgiftstest.com)

The gift of wisdom is the ability to speak to the life of an individual or to a specific situation with great understanding and a righteous perspective, with the goal of guiding others toward a life of holiness and worship.

The gift of knowledge is an understanding of the things in this world and in our lives that is founded in the Gospel and rooted in the Scriptures and the ability to speak this knowledge to others in a given situation. The gift of knowledge allows a believer to relate the Scriptures, and particularly the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to all aspects of life in this world. They can see how it connects to every situation and circumstance and how the reality and truth of the Gospel is to inform every decision a Christian makes.

The gift of faith is rooted in one's saving faith in Christ and the trust that comes through a close relationship with the Savior. Those with this gift have a trust and confidence in God that allows them to live boldly for Him and manifest that faith in mighty ways. Those with the gift of faith trust that God is sovereign and He is good. They take Him at His Word and put the full weight of their lives in His hands. They expect God to move and are not surprised when He answers a prayer or performs a miracle.

The gift of healings is given at various times and places to reveal the God of heaven to the sick and tormented. Jesus is the Great Healer and Physician and during His ministry on earth He healed countless people and cast out demons. Those who have this gift are compassionate toward the sick and pray over them regularly. They have great faith and trust that God can and will heal some and are not deterred when He chooses not to.

Working of miracles - The Greek phrase literally translates “workings of powers.” The double plural most likely means that these gifts were diverse and were not permanently available at the will of the gifted believer, but instead were bestowed at various times and circumstances. Thus, the gifts are subject to the divine will of God and His purposes and are not decided by the one who performs the miraculous works. Those with this gift understand that God is Sovereign and He can work when and how He desires, but they make sure they are available and listening to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

The gift of prophecy is the ability to receive a divinely inspired message and deliver it to others in the church. These messages can take the form of exhortation, correction, disclosure of secret sins, prediction of future events, comfort, inspiration, or other revelations given to equip and edify the body of Christ. Those who have the gift of prophecy differ from the Old Testament Prophets who spoke the authoritative Word of God directly. Their words were recorded as Scripture as they proclaimed, “Thus says The Lord,” whereas the messages from those with the spiritual gift of prophecy must be tested.

The gift of distinguishing between spirits is being able to distinguish, discern, judge or appraise a person, statement, situation, or environment. The Holy Spirit gives the gift of discernment to enable certain Christians to clearly recognize and distinguish between the influence of God, Satan, the world, and the flesh in a given situation. The church needs those with this gift to warn believers in times of danger or keep them from being led astray by false teaching.

The gift of tongues is the utterance of prayer or of a message glorifying God, typically spoken to God, in a language that is unknown to the one speaking it. Tongues can be human languages such as those heard in Acts 2, but often may be languages no one understands. Tongues are not “ecstatic speech” but are always orderly and are able to be controlled by the one speaking. The intention of the

gift is to glorify God now, but also to prepare ourselves as His church to glorify Him forever in heaven. The gift however is only partial, in that it is not given to all believers, and in the context of the church requires an interpreter in order for it to be edifying.

The gift of interpretation of tongues is the supernatural ability to understand and explain messages uttered in an unknown language. God “reveals” the meaning of the words or message being spoken and allows the interpreter to communicate its meaning to those who need to hear it. When this happens in the church, the church is edified and God is glorified.

So you can see Paul listed a variety of gifts. This isn't an exhaustive list as we can see when we compare it to other lists he gives in other letters he wrote. It just contains a variety that Paul thought were important for the Corinthian believers to see. Notice that some of them do include unusual behavior, like healings, miracles, and tongues, but others involve what we might think are more like normal Christian service – things like knowledge, wisdom, and faith. These are all gifts given and empowered from the same Spirit as he wills. They are all spiritual and therefore there is no heightened level of spirituality or closeness to God by those who possess the more unusual abilities. Paul is teaching that all gifts, services, and activities are equally valuable in the church, and the people in Corinth especially needed to hear that.

I think we need to hear that as well so we know that every gift is important and we all have an important place in the church. So I want you to think back to the characteristics you may have thought about at the beginning of this sermon – things you see in yourself or others that you might think make them more spiritual or connected with God. It's easy for us to compare ourselves with others and then feel either discouraged or prideful depending on how we stack up. The truth is that God has made you uniquely you and he's given you gifts that are valuable and wants you to use in ministry to build up the church. You are just as important as anybody else when it comes to your role and ministry in the church.

What is that role? Have you found the right fit yet? I encourage you to take the spiritual gifts test in our church library to get a better idea of how God has gifted you. But knowing your gifts isn't enough. God wants you to use them. So look at ways you can get involved in ministry in order to build others up. Talk to people who are already doing those things and get plugged in.