

Revitalize: how the Holy Spirit brings us life “The Spirit Gifts”

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on May 15, 2016

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 12.
- This morning we are talking about the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts. If you have been a Christian for even a little while you know that Christians are often very divided on the issue of spiritual gifts.
 - It usually comes down to what people think about the so-called “miraculous gifts” like prophecy, healing, or speaking in tongues.
 - Churches who call themselves “charismatic” or Pentecostal believe these gifts are still active today. Non-charismatics churches like many Mennonites and Baptists disagree and say they have ceased, although this is changing. The result is that the whole topic of spiritual gifts usually gets reduced down to debates and results in divisions within the church.
- Ironically, the modern church is not that much different from the ancient church in Corinth. This church was experiencing division over the gifts and so they were asking the apostle Paul to respond to it. Evidently, there were those of a more charismatic persuasion who wanted to elevate certain gifts, especially tongues, as proof of who was really spiritual. They wanted Paul to back them up.
 - But it also seems that there were non-charismatics in Corinth who were skeptical. They wanted Paul to correct those crazy charismatics.
 - In 1 Corinthians 12-14 Paul seeks to repair the divisions in this church. His aim, and my aim today, is to recast the entire way we think about and discuss spiritual gifts. He does this, and I want to do this, in order to unite us and then in this unity for each of us to use our Spirit-given gifts for the good of the church.
- To that end, let’s talk about four things this morning: the Lord of the gifts, the nature of the gifts, the diverse unity of the gifts, and the purpose of the gifts.

THE LORD OF THE GIFTS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** First then, we must repair the divisions that exist in the church over spiritual gifts because of the Lord of the gifts.
 - Paul introduces his subject in verse 1 by saying that these Corinthians need some further teaching on spiritual gifts. **READ 1** – *Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.*
- Right away Paul reframes the entire debate. All of the divisions between Christians on the issue of spiritual gifts come down to the question of who really has the Holy Spirit.
 - Charismatics are prone to think they are the ones who are really in tune with the Holy Spirit because of the gifts they see at work in their midst. Non-charismatics however are skeptical of this and are prone to think charismatics are flaky and off track about the Holy Spirit.

- So both sides look down on the other as not really having the Holy Spirit. This is what divides.
- Right away Paul sets a foundation of unity. He emphasizes that all Christians have the Holy Spirit. Look at verses 2-3.
 - **READ 2-3** - *You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. 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.*
- So Paul says, *“Stop. We need to refocus this whole discussion. If we want to talk about who really has the Holy Spirit we should not be looking to see what gifts are at work or not at work in our churches. We must begin with Jesus. Whoever bows the knee to Jesus and submits to him as Lord has the Holy Spirit for ‘No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.’”*
 - Therefore, we must begin this entire discussion about gifts on the basis of our unity in Jesus. This unity is produced by the Holy Spirit.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** The charismatic and non-charismatic camps need to stop looking down on each other because all who submit to Jesus have the Holy Spirit. This unity, centred on Christ, is the foundation of the discussion.

THE NATURE OF THE GIFTS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** Second, we must repair the divisions that exist in the church over spiritual gifts because of the nature of the gifts. Here we are asking, “what are spiritual gifts?”
 - One of the primary reasons Christians divide on this issue is because far too often they have reduced the discussion about gifts to a debate about whether the so-called miraculous gifts have ceased or are still active today.
 - But this is to like saying we want to talk about what doctors do but then only debating the issue of how much doctors should prescribe drugs to patients. That is far too narrow. When talking about spiritual gifts we must not fall into the trap of immediately talking about speaking in tongues. We must speak broadly about what spiritual gifts are. We must talk about the nature of the gifts.
- When Christians think of the term “spiritual gifts” they typically think of it as *a technical term to describe a precise category of Spirit empowered abilities*. So there are books written entitled “19 gifts of the Holy Spirit.” These 19 are then further divided into miraculous and non-miraculous gifts, each is defined, and the Christian is told to find which one, of the 19, is their gift.
 - But this raises many questions: are there a precise number of gifts? If so, why is one book called “19 gifts of the Spirit”, another one called “12 gifts of the Spirit” and another one called “25 gifts of the Spirit”? Furthermore, how do we know what are spiritual gifts and what we might call “natural abilities”? Also, is it right to divide all gifts into these two categories of miraculous and non-miraculous?
 - What I want to show you is that most Christians think too narrowly on this. The New Testament has a broad concept of God’s grace in

gifting his people whereas we have, to our detriment, narrowed it to debates about miraculous versus non-miraculous gifts.

- We see this right away in verse 1. Look at it with me. **READ 1 – Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.** Now the literal wording here is simply, “*Now about spirituals brothers...*” It is perfectly fine to add the word “gifts” because that is what he is talking about but I bring this up to show you that this term “spiritual gifts” is not a technical term that Paul is using. Paul is not saying, “*I am now talking about this precise category called spiritual gifts of which there are 19 of them divided into miraculous and non-miraculous gifts.*”
 - The words “*spiritual gift*” only occur one time in the NT. Surprisingly, it is not in a gift list passage like this one. It is found in Rom 1:11 which says, “*I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong.*” When you hear this I bet you start thinking in precise categories like Paul is going to impart one of the gifts from these lists to them.
 - But that is not what Paul means. He defines what he means by “spiritual gift” in the next verse: “*that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.*” So the spiritual gift will be that refreshment they feel as they encourage each other.
- The word for “gift” in the Greek is “charismata.” But you must not think of charismata in a narrow sense like just preaching or tongues. It has a broader meaning.
 - The word “charismata” comes from the word “charis” which means “grace.” So “charisma” means “grace-gift.” The word is used 17 times in the New Testament and it is very broad. In 1 Corinthians 7:7 marriage is said to be a grace gift. Our salvation in Jesus is said to be a grace gift. This is the greatest gift of grace we receive.
 - So you see the New Testament concept of giftedness is very broad.
- This also becomes clear when we look at the five major gift lists in the New Testaments. **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** I will put them up on the screen so we can compare and contrast them. As you look at these lists, what stands out to you as totally obvious? Don’t get too technical. At least four things stand out.
 - First, all the lists are different. No gift appears on all the lists and there is no master list. It is not like the 10 commandments. Those are always the same. Paul does not say, “*I want to talk about spiritual gifts. Here is the list of 19.*” This should tell us something, namely, that the lists are not meant to be exhaustive. They are meant to be samples - samples of some grace gifts Jesus gives by His Holy Spirit to His Church.
 - So Paul is not trying to say there are only 19 gifts. The fact that they are all different means there are likely many more.
 - Second, the order of the gifts varies considerably. They are not listed in priority order. Prophecy, for instance, is 6th in the 1st list, 2nd in the 2nd list and 1st in the 3rd list.
 - Having said that, it is striking that tongues is always last on the list. In other New Testament lists this can be a way of downplaying something. For instance, there are many places where the New

Testament lists the 12 disciples. In every list Judas Iscariot is always placed last for he will betray Jesus.

- Could it be that Paul places tongues last because the Corinthians were elevating this gift above the others?
- Third, the lists contain an impressive mixture of what some call “non-miraculous” and “miraculous” abilities.
 - But notice that Paul makes no distinction between them. They are all gifts of grace. Paul does not say here is the list of ordinary gifts and here are the miraculous ones. They are all in one category of grace gifts that the Spirit has given to the Church.
- Finally, if there are any distinctions it seems to be divided only between how the Spirit graciously gifts his people with speech and how he graciously gifts his people for service.
 - Speaking gifts include things like evangelism, teaching, and tongues while service gifts include things like hospitality, helps, and giving.
- So let me bring all of this together with some summary comments.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** The NT does not present us with a definitive list of clearly defined “spiritual gifts.”
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** The NT uses the image of giftedness to talk about how God’s grace shows itself in many ways in our lives.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** The things we commonly call “spiritual gifts” fall into this framework of God’s grace at work among His Church.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** There is no distinction between miraculous gifts and non-miraculous for all our gifts of grace.
 - Our definition of spiritual gifts then needs to be much broader. Ken Radant, one of my seminary professors describes spiritual gifting like this: **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** *“Any ability, office, role, circumstance, relationship, or experience in the life of the believer can be called a charisma—or “spiritual gift”—when it is viewed from the perspective that it is graciously given to us by God as His means of equipping us for the unique role He intends us to play in His Body the Church.”*
- So this should go a long way to repairing the divisions that we have over spiritual gifts. The discussion must not simply be about tongues and prophesy. It must be about all the ways that God’s grace has been poured out in your life and how those grace gifts can be used to benefit the church.
 - We spend far too much time debating tongues and prophecy when we should be talking about how God’s grace has shaped us through our upbringing, our experiences, schooling to serve a unique role in his church.
- It also means that we must get rid of this sharp distinction between natural abilities and spiritual gifts. Take preaching for example. Think of a preacher whose gift of preaching really blesses you. How did that gift of preaching come about?
 - Is it not a complex mix of the man’s personality, voice, life experiences, education, study, and the power of the Spirit working through all of these

things? What I am trying to show you is that all of these factors are gifts of grace that God's works together to what we call a gifted preacher. You can't distinguish natural and supernatural. It is all grace for as Paul says elsewhere, "*What do you have that you did not receive?*"

- This should be of great encouragement to many of you. Some of you get so discouraged by this talk of spiritual gifts because yours is not so obvious in the traditional narrow categories of 19 or so gifts.
 - But if you see all that you are and all that you have are grace gifts that can serve the church, then you should see you definitely have something to offer.
- Can you see then how already the discussion is being reframed? This helps repair the divisions among us.
 - When talking about spiritual gifts we must start on the basis of unity in Christ for all who confess Him as Lord have the Holy Spirit.
 - We must then move away from precise and rigid categories and think of the broad ways in which God's grace has gifted each of us to serve the Church.

THE DIVERSE UNITY OF THE GIFTS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** Third, we must repair the divisions that exist in the Church over spiritual gifts because of the diverse unity of the gifts.
 - Having established our unity in the Spirit, Paul now wants to emphasize that unity does not mean sameness. The Spirit's gifts are diverse.
 - Watch in verse 4-6 how he emphasizes diversity and yet always comes back to unity.
- Look at verse 4. **READ 4-6** – *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.*
 - Notice the Trinitarian nature of this. The Spirit, the Lord who is Jesus, and God who is Father. We are unified in this one God but this one God loves diversity. He is after all the God who makes every snowflake different and who creates different skin colours.
 - Let me draw out three implications that this diversity demands of us.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** First, the diversity of the gifts means we must beware of the dark side of our personal gifting.
 - Here's what I mean. Let's say you have a particular heart for the homeless. You love to serve. The first thing to say about this is that it is wonderful and you should do it. But there is a dark side to this gift of service. The dark side is that you think everyone else has to have the same passion as you and serve like you. But here's what happens. Others don't share your passion. They don't serve like you do.
 - It is right here that many Christians then get disillusioned and very critical of the church. They start saying the church doesn't care about the poor and they leave because they think it is a bad church. But what has really happened here is that they think every Christian must be just like them.

- But here is the thing. While one person is saying, “The church’s greatest priority needs to be the poor” another person is saying, “What we need most is for people to pray.” At the same time another person says, “Teaching children, that is the most important thing” and yet another person says, “If we could just get people singing what I think needs to be sung and in the way I think it needs to be sung then it would change everything.”
 - Do you see what’s going on? Every Christian has a gift. God has put it in them. But the dark side of the gift is that they think everyone else should share their passion. In reality God wants diversity, not sameness. If you have a passion for something then pursue it but beware of the dark side of your gift.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** In the second place, the diversity of the gifts means we must value all gifts. In Baptist circles gifts like preaching or music often get elevated. Friends, I am thankful for your encouragement to me but let us also give thanks to God for giving us the more hidden gifts.
 - Oh how grateful I am for those who serve our church in food ministries. How grateful I am for those who teach kids. How thankful I am for those who serve behind the scenes - for the finance committee, the fellowship committee, the outreach and missions committee, for those who welcome at the doors, for our office staff, for the music teams, the building committee, membership committee, tech team, kids ministry and youth ministry.
 - To each of you who serve in this church in any way, shape, or form, I want to thank you.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 14)** The diversity of the gifts also means we must seek to serve within our gifts. Look at verse 7. **READ 7 – *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit.*** Every Christian has been given grace gifts. These manifestations are those things that you excel at and things that you are good at. They will need to be developed but they are your strengths.
 - How do you know how the Spirit has gifted you? Ask yourself, ***“What do I love doing that blesses other people in the church?”*** When you operate in your strengths it feels somewhat natural to you. Others also comment on how blessed they are when you do certain things.
 - So God does not intend for you to primarily work in areas where you are weak. Oh yes, there is a sense in which we serve just to serve. You can’t say, ***“It is not my strength to wash dishes or stack chairs so I won't do it.”*** No, you serve. But the Spirit has given you strengths to build others up.
- It’s like throwing a ball with your dominant hand. I am right handed. When I throw with my right hand I feel strong. Everything works smoothly. The ball flies fast and is accurate.
 - But when I throw with my left hand it is pathetic. I can’t even throw half the distance. It’s not accurate. My other arm dangles at my side.
- To me preaching is like throwing with my right hand. But there is much in the church that is my left hand. Yes, I could run the nursery or the kids but it would be like throwing with my left hand. I could do it, but it wouldn’t be pretty. The

same with bookkeeping and accounting. That would be like asking me to throw with my left foot.

- So let me ask you, *“what ways can you serve the church that feels like you are throwing with your dominant hand?”* You know where you are gifted when it feels natural and others are blessed by it. Oh yes, you may need to grow in your gifts. Even a pitcher needs to work on his dominant hand. Nothing is easy. But I am just trying to get you thinking in terms of what definitely are not your gifts and what are. So quit worrying about what you are not gifted at and focus on what you are gifted at.
 - When we appreciate diversity and operate in our strengths we repair divisions in the church.

THE PURPOSE OF THE GIFTS

- That brings us right in to the final point. **(SHOW SLIDE 15)** We must repair the divisions that exist in the Church over spiritual gifts because of the purpose of the gifts.
 - Why has God given you gifts? Why has he poured out his grace in your life? We see the purpose stated in verse 7. **READ 7 – *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*** Divisions are healed when we seek the good of others. How does Jesus build up his Church? It is through each person using their gifts to serve each other.
 - JI Packer writes, *“From heaven Christ uses Christians as his mouth, his hands, his feet, even his smile; it is through us, his people that he speaks and acts, meets, moves, and saves here and now in this world.”*¹
- **(SHOW SLIDE 16)** So grace gifts are to be used for the common good of the church. God has given you abilities, talents, experiences, education, and strengths not for yourself but for others. More specifically for the common good of the church. Remember my professor’s definition. All of our abilities, experiences and such are gifts only *when* they are viewed God’s way of equipping us to serve a role in his body – the Church.
 - So there is a massive assumption. The assumption is that every Christian is committed to a local church. And how does Paul view commitment? Not just by attendance. There is one answer here: you are using your gifts to serve the common good of the body. Oh friends, what a challenge to this generation. In this church we are lucky to see many of you 2 Sundays a month. Our church, like so many other churches, can be described by the 80/20 rule. 80% of the work is done by 20% of the people.
 - Now we as leaders we need to do a better job showing you where to serve and how to do it but that assumes that we have a large pool of people who say, *“I am committed to this church and am ready and willing to use my life for its common good.”*
- What is one way you can use your unique strengths to serve the common good of the body?

¹ JI Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 83.