

The Imperfect Church – 22
The Gifted Church
1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Introduction

According to the *Journal of State Taxation*, 40% of shoppers will purchase a store gift card of some kind for friends and family. On top of that, almost 35% will purchase a restaurant gift card for them. However, the research shows that we do not use them like we should. The average American has over \$300 in unused gift cards in their home. Over the last 10 years, over \$40 billion have gone unused. It is always a sad problem when we've been given a tremendous gift, but allow it to remain unused.

This is the truth Paul now turns to in 1 Corinthians. He has made several lengthy arguments about different issues at the Church in Corinth, and apparently he likes to take three chapters to do it. Unity is covered in chapters 1-3. Sexual immorality is covered in chapters 5-7. Food offered to idols is covered in chapters 8-10. The final three-chapter issue he deals with is the issue of spiritual gifts, covered in chapters 12-14. Here is his point: every believer has been given at least one spiritual gift, and to allow it to remain unused, or to use it inappropriately, is a sad reality of lost potential, people not being helped, missing out on God's will for you, and the Church being harmed.

For the next several weeks as we walk through these three great chapters, we are tackling one of the most divisive issues even still today. The role of spiritual gifts, specifically the miraculous gifts, continues to confuse people and separate believers into different camps. And that really shouldn't surprise us, because that is exactly what spiritual gifts were doing in the Church in Corinth. The Corinthians divided over everything, including this.

Paul structures his argument quite effectively, as he has done all throughout the letter. He will introduce the topic (first part of chapter 12), give some foundational, theological truths to guide the topic (back half of chapter 12 and chapter 13), and then get into the practical specifics of it all that really center around the gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues (chapter 14). As we walk through this, I think the most important guiding principle is this: The Corinthian Church was getting spiritual gifts wrong. They were practicing them in an inappropriate, unbiblical, and unhelpful manner. This truth will help us as we attempt to bring some clarity to this hot-topic issue and correct some of the utter nonsense happening in the name of spiritual gifts.

1 Corinthians 12:1-11 - Now, dear brothers and sisters, regarding your question about the special abilities the Spirit gives us. I don't want you to misunderstand this. ²You know that when you were still pagans, you were led astray and swept along in worshiping speechless idols. ³So I want you to know that no one speaking by the Spirit of God will curse Jesus, and no one can say Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all. ⁵There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same Lord. ⁶God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us.

⁷A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other. ⁸To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice; to another the same Spirit gives a message of special knowledge. ⁹The same Spirit gives great faith to another, and to someone else the one Spirit gives the gift of healing. ¹⁰He gives one person the power to perform miracles, and another the ability to prophesy. He gives someone else the ability to discern whether a message is from the Spirit of God or from another spirit. Still another person is given the ability to speak in unknown languages, while another is given the ability to interpret what is being said. ¹¹It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have.

Let's walk through this for the next few minutes together.

1. THE AUTHENTICITY OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS (V. 1-3)
2. THE UNITY OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS (V. 4-6,11)
3. THE PURPOSE OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS (V. 7)
4. THE DEFINITION OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS (V. 8-10)

1. THE AUTHENTICITY OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

He begins by introducing the new topic in v. 1 – “special abilities the Spirit gives us.” That phrase literally translates “the spiritual things.” From context we know that the “things” he is talking about are spiritual gifts, so the translation makes sense. Earlier in chapter 3 Paul has already talked about things and people being “spiritual.” You may remember, someone saying they are “spiritual” in our world today is not what Paul means when he uses the word. Today, people who claim to be “spiritual...but not religious” mean something like they believe in ghosts and UFO's, pray to someone or something, and like Oprah. When Paul talks about a person being “spiritual” he means that person possesses the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit's presence in their life defines them. Now the attention comes back around to what it means to be “spiritual.” When a person becomes a Christian, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in their life. What does that mean? Part of what that means is that the Spirit brings with Him gifts for you to use to serve others.

He says at the end of v. 1 that he doesn't want them to misunderstand this. Literally translates, to not be unknowing, to not be ignorant. Why? Because they were. They had spiritual gifts, but how they were practicing them was ignorant of how God has designed. We will see that clearly, especially in chapter 14. The basic problem for them was this: they were viewing those with more "showy" gifts, more "mysterious" gifts as somehow spiritually elevated and elite. Specifically, those who had the gift of speaking in tongues, due to its miraculous and mysterious nature, were taking charge in church and thought they were more "spiritual" than those with other gifts. Paul's driving concern over all three of these chapters is the unity of the church and the humility of having spiritual gifts.

In v. 2 Paul reminds them of their pagan, idolatrous background. Part of the pagan worship in their day was to get caught up in the emotion and experience of the worship. This led to grand, highly-charged emotional environments where people got whipped up into a frenzy to show their devotion to their deity. And the more crazy the frenzy, the more "spiritual" it was. Included in that was what we call today "ecstatic speech or utterances." The deity would possess the worshiper and the worshiper would then babble in some unknown language, and it was viewed to be this incredibly "spiritual" enviable experience because that person was so close to the pagan god that they were talking the god's language. That experience, multiplied countless times over in the pagan temples, created a chaotic, emotionally-charged experience. The Corinthians had been "swept along" in things like that, and what chapter 14 makes clear is that they brought those experiences into the Church.

Now Paul will clarify exactly how we can know what the presence of the Holy Spirit will produce. V. 3 – "No one speaking by the Spirit of God will curse Jesus..." That makes sense. While this was unlikely to be happening in their Church, statements about cursing Jesus were made in pagan temples. Why? Because from chapter 10 we know that those idols, though not real, were being powered by demons. Read the Gospel accounts in the Bible. The demons know exactly who Jesus is, and they don't like him. So apparently in these pagan temples, the worshipers possessed by their deity, uttering this "spiritual" babbling, were cursing Jesus. This is a demonic practice, not Christian.

End of v. 3 – "no one can say Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit." Of all the things to be said during times of worship, the one that is marked clearly as from the Holy Spirit is that Jesus is Lord. So when the Holy Spirit is speaking to and through Christians, this is what He says, not some unintelligible babble. "Jesus is Lord" is the earliest

creed of the first-century Church, succinctly affirming the core of Christian doctrine. What we know from the historical record is that at early Christian worship gatherings, guests would be asked to leave towards the end, and then the Christians would say this great statement together. Only the Christians would say it because it isn't true for anyone else. Only the Christians would say it because only the Christians could say it.

Lord, Greek word *kurios*, was the official title of the Roman Emperor. The cry of the Roman Empire was Caesar is Lord. Christians would then affirm that, no Caesar is not, Jesus is Lord. And that is a hugely theological statement. Three short words, but eternally profound implications. Jesus...can't say that unless you affirm the reality of his existence, his earthly life and ministry. Is...can't say that unless you affirm the reality of his resurrection, which you cannot affirm unless you affirm his sacrificial death on the cross. Lord...you cannot say that unless you affirm the Jesus deserves ultimate devotion and loyalty, meaning you must affirm Jesus' ability to forgive sins, grant eternal life, instill hope, and his return to usher us into eternity. All of that to say this: the true mark of the presence of the Holy Spirit is a focus on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Your faith is based on this Christian theology, not your experience, and not your emotions.

2. THE UNITY OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

v. 4-6, 11 - ⁴ There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same Lord. ⁶ God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us...¹¹ It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have.

Though Paul seems to focus on the diversity of gifts... "different kinds" in v. 4, "different kinds" in v. 5, "different ways" in v. 6, his focus is on the one source of all those different gifts. "The same Spirit is the source of them all" v. 4. "We serve the same Lord" v. 5. "It is the same God who does the work" v. 6. For a church that is divisive over spiritual gifts, and elevating some people over others because of their showy gifts, this is incredibly necessary information. You don't have the gift you have because God thinks you're awesome and gave you a better gift because of that. You aren't now awesome and more elite than others because you have the gift you have. All gifts come from the same Spirit, for serving the same Lord, to glorify the same God.

The Spirit has granted these gifts; you have not earned them. In fact, it is inherent in the word Paul uses for "gift." The Greek word is *charismata* (where we get the word *charismatic*). It's root word is an incredible one throughout the Bible. *Chara* is joy. *Chairo* is rejoice. *Charis* is grace. So a *charismata* is a gift of grace, something undeservedly given. The word is used today in Modern Greek for a birthday present. Spiritual gifts are just that...gifts. Meaning, just like our salvation that is by *charis* (Ephesians 2), we cannot boast or brag about them. This is something Paul has already tried to get them to learn.

1 Corinthians 4:7 - What do you have that God hasn't given you? And if everything you have is from God, why boast as though it were not a gift?

3. THE PURPOSE OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

v. 7 – A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other.

Richard Hays – "All members of the community receive gifts of the Spirit, not just a few leaders or spiritually super-endowed prodigies; furthermore, the whole purpose of God's distribution of these gifts is for the benefit of the community as a whole, not merely the private edification of the individuals who receive the gifts."¹

Whatever spiritual gifts you have received are not for you...they are for those around you. So let's go back for a minute to where we started with the unused gift cards. You have been given this undeserved gift and you haven't used it. Here is the difference...you aren't the only one missing out because of that. The entire Church is missing out because of that! That gift, meant to help someone else, to serve someone else, being unused means that person isn't receiving the help they need that God designed you to meet. We won't spend much time on this point because the entire next section in chapter 12 is about it.

David Prior – "To be truly 'spiritual' drives a person neither to ecstasy nor to individualism nor to other-worldliness, but into the life of the local church as an expression of his personal commitment to Jesus as Lord and to his body here on earth."²

¹ Richard B. Hays, [First Corinthians](#), Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 211.

² David Prior, [The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 195.

1 Peter 4:10 - **10** God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another.

4. THE DEFINITION OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

This is where I want us to camp for the rest of our time. I want to walk through these gifts, define them, clear up some misunderstanding and misinterpretation of them, and provide a foundation we will build on over the next few weeks.

In v. 8-10 Paul lists a total of 9 spiritual gifts, with most of them on the miraculous side. The first two are gifts in which God speaks to a person directly. V. 8 – “the ability to give wise advice...gives a message of special knowledge.” Literally, a ‘word of wisdom’ and a ‘word of knowledge.’ Remember, this Bible is not complete at this time in history. For them to know and understand God’s will, God needed to speak directly to people. Those with these gifts were able to hear directly from God and communicate that to others.

The gift of faith is not referring to saving faith, but the kind of faith that can ‘move mountains.’ The ability to trust God in profound ways, and help others to do the same, is truly a gift to the Church. Then there is the gift of healing and the power to perform miracles. Certainly these are miraculous as they require power to violate the laws of nature. Some have the ability to discern whether a message is from God or someone else. What a helpful gift! When God is speaking directly to his people, that opens the door for some to speak about what God told them, without God actually having told them. Plus, if we’ve learned anything from chapter 10 and the first couple verses of chapter 12, demons are real and God isn’t the only one speaking. If God is going to speak audibly, we need to know it is really from him.

The final gifts are the ones I want to focus on for a few minutes, as they are the specific issue at Corinth, the focus of the problem, and the content of chapter 14: prophecy and speaking in tongues/interpretation. Much confusion and division happen today because of misinterpretation and misunderstanding of these gifts, and their role in the church today.

Let’s start with prophecy. From the OT on, God has had prophets that spoke his message to his people. Sometimes that message was foretelling, the prediction of the future. Other times, that message was more forth-telling, simply passing on what God wants. And really, either way, the ability didn’t necessarily lie with the prophet, they simply shared what God said. I would argue that prophecy is the least miraculous one listed. The miracle is found

in hearing God directly and audibly. But the role of the prophet was simple...tell people what God says. The word itself even shows us this. Its root is the verb *phe*, meaning to speak. Its suffix is *pro* as in pro-phet, means before or in front of. A prophet is simply one who speaks before or in front of other people.

William Barclay - "It would give a better idea of the meaning of this word if we translated it as *preaching*. We have associated *prophecy* too much with the foretelling of what was to happen. But, at all times, *prophecy* has been far more *forthtelling* than *foretelling*. Prophets are those who live so close to God that they know his mind and heart and will, and so can make them known to others. Because of that, their function is twofold. (1) Prophets bring rebuke and warning, telling men and women that their way of action is not in accordance with the will of God. (2) Prophets bring advice and guidance, seeking to direct men and women into the ways God wishes them to go."³

Let's look at speaking in tongues. This is the one that people get all bent out of shape over. Let's bring some clarity to it that hopefully will make sense and correct the goofiness surrounding it. In Acts 2 the Holy Spirit falls on the early followers of Jesus at Pentecost. They go outside as a crowd gathers together because they can all hear the sound of a rushing wind. All of the disciples start speaking in tongues. What does that mean? We have attached such goofy, fantastical notions to this that the biblical concept of speaking in tongues has been utterly forgotten. Let's look at what actually happened.

Acts 2:1-11 - On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. ² Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting.³ Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. ⁴ And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

⁵ At that time there were devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem. ⁶ When they heard the loud noise, everyone came running, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers.

⁷ They were completely amazed. "How can this be?" they exclaimed. "These people are all from Galilee, ⁸ and yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages! ⁹ Here we are—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia,

³ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, 3rd ed., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 130–131.

Pamphylia, Egypt, and the areas of Libya around Cyrene, visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans, and Arabs. And we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!”

The Greek word for ‘tongue’ simply means language. Like when we say someone speaks their native ‘tongue’ we mean they speak their native language. That’s it. No other definition of the word. No other implication. It simply means language. It is used multiple times in the book of Revelation to refer to the people in Heaven being from every tribe, nation, and tongue (language). From the very beginning, the gift of tongues has been the supernatural ability to speak in a human language unknown to the speaker, but known to the hearer. That’s what happened in Acts 2. The crowd heard the message of God’s goodness in their native dialects. This isn’t some weird babbling (*woulda bought a Mazda, shoulda bought a Honda*). This is Peter and the others speaking in these other languages, though they did not know them.

Speaking in tongues is an evangelistic gift. As the Gospel spread around the world, it was taken around the world by men and women who had never been outside of Israel. So to break down the language barrier that would keep people from hearing the Gospel, God gifted some of his people with the ability to speak in those languages. This is why an interpreter is needed. If you get up in church and speak in Spanish, and none of us know Spanish, we need someone to interpret that for us so that we can benefit from what you are saying. So God gifted people to interpret those languages, so that everyone could benefit from the message. So the picture of a room full of people at a Charismatic Church all babbling together...the Bible knows nothing of that phenomenon. The pagan temples of Corinth do, but not the Bible. I have had people tell me they have the gift of tongues. Here is my response: That’s great, God is calling you to the mission field. Whatever language he has gifted you to speak is the native tongue of someone who needs to hear the Gospel.

Now, with all that said (and we will talk much more about that over the next few weeks), let me talk about the role of the miraculous gifts in the Church today. There are essentially four categories of views Christians hold on this: Continuationists (hard and soft), and Cessationists (hard and soft).

Continuationist ←-----→ Cessationist
 Hard Soft Soft Hard

Continuationists believe that the miraculous gifts continue. The soft side of that says that things are different today than in NT times, but these gifts are still in play. The hard side of that says life today should be no different than in the book of Acts. We should be able to walk down the street and our shadow heal people like it did with Peter. Cessationists believe that the miraculous gifts have ceased. The hard side of that says miracles no longer occur. The soft side of that says that God still performs miracles, but the gifts enabling people to do so are gone. This is where I land personally on this issue.

God still heals, absolutely. But the gift of someone able to walk around to heal, I believe that is gone. Those claiming to have it are charlatans. The gift of tongues seems to happen much on the mission field today, because it is evangelistic. It is a gift for believers to reach unbelievers, with no place in the worship gathering. But the idea of it being a private prayer language isn't a biblical view (we will talk about that more over the next few weeks). God still speaks today, absolutely. But not directly and audibly to people. Why? Because God has already spoken definitively to us in the Bible. We don't need fresh revelations from God, we already have all the revelation we need. This is why Prophecy is best understood as preaching today. It is speaking on behalf of God (from the authoritative Bible).

So words matter. If someone says to me, "God told me..." if the next words out of their mouth is not Scripture, I discount what they say. I think most people mean "impressions" from the Holy Spirit when they say stuff like, "God told me to do...God wants me to..." So let's commit to communicate accurately about these things...God didn't tell you audibly to do anything. You sense that God is leading you to do something. Much better. Here is why this matters: several years ago I had a lady at the church who like to criticize me by saying, "God wants me to tell you..." and then she would give the criticism. While I think she meant well, what had she just done? By attributing her criticism to God, it became authoritative. In her mind, I had to obey her because God spoke it all. That's nonsense.

There is only one ultimate authority for Christians...the Bible. The Holy Spirit uses it to speak. It does the work. It convicts. It encourages. Hebrews 4 says it is living and active, cutting to the heart. 2 Timothy 3 says it is inspired by God and useful in equipping us for every good work. So we don't need a fresh word from God, we need to rediscover a very old word from him. If you want God to speak to you, it is really simple...read the Bible. If you want God to speak to you audibly, read the Bible out loud. The Bible is enough; it is fully sufficient for us. Our standard, our authority. And we surrender to it.