

Spiritual Gifts

Since the beginning of the year, we have engaged with the profound teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount ... and I trust we will get back to Matthew in the not-too-distant future. But for the next few weeks we're going to dip into a topic that is vital for the health of the church - the study of the "gifts of the Spirit", the gifts that God has given SO THAT His works can be done on this earth.

The story is a long one, because the coming of the Spirit was prophesied at least 300 years before the birth of Christ. In fact, on the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit was given, Peter addressed the curious crowds with a quotation from Joel:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on My servants, both men and women, I will pour out My Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. (Acts 2:17,18)

Besides prophecy and visions and dreams, what was the purpose for God pouring out His Spirit? Here, there is no shortage of Bible verses that give us parts of the picture of what the Spirit would do when He came. For example, in Luke's gospel we hear Jesus saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4:18,19) And near the end of John's Gospel, we read that Jesus breathed on His disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven ..." (21:22f)

Another interesting reference to the ministry of the Holy Spirit comes from Jesus in Luke 12:12, where He says, 'When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.' In the book of Acts we read that Jesus, just before leaving to return to His Father, promised His disciples that they would be given power when the Holy Spirit came on them (1:8), a power that would enable them to be bold witnesses to Jesus. And later in the book of Acts we read about the Spirit giving boldness, prophetic insight, direction in making important decisions, an ability to speak in languages they didn't know, an authority or power to heal.

Summing all of that up, you see the Holy Spirit bringing the presence and power and authority of Jesus Himself. The Holy Spirit enables the preaching of good news to the poor, commands us to forgive others, empowers us to speak with conviction, gives us wisdom and insight and guidance in pursuing the Kingdom agenda of the Father and the power to heal the sick and deliver those oppressed by demons. Everything we need to live for God and to overcome the evil one is given to us by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the presence of Jesus here on earth and He is the gift that God gives to every believer, the gift that makes everything new. He is, as Jesus said to the woman at the

well in John 4, “a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” (4:14). Three chapters later, Jesus is attending the Feast of Tabernacles, and He declares:

If you are thirsty, come to Me! If you believe in Me, come and drink! For the Scriptures declare that rivers of living water will flow out from within.” (When He said ‘living water’, He was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in Him.) (John 7:37-39)

And on the night of Jesus’ betrayal, as He prepared His disciples for the days to come, He counselled them about the Holy Spirit, telling them that He was the Spirit of Truth, that He was the Counsellor, that He would remind them of Jesus’ teaching, that He would reveal the future to them, that He would be within them. And over all these words about the Spirit is this one that comes right after assuring the disciples that the Spirit was WITH them and would be IN them; Jesus says, “I will not abandon you as orphans — I will come to you.” (Jn. 14:18)

The Holy Spirit IS the presence of Jesus, He is the way, the truth and the life; He is the power of God to do the works of God through those who believe in Jesus.

Now, what do you think the presence of Jesus within the lives of the believers wants to do through us? He wants us to speak the words and do the works that Jesus would do. He wants us to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. But there is something new, something different about how the Spirit operates in us, and the new thing is that He doesn’t make us into millions of mini-Jesus clones, but He empowers us and gifts us in a way that causes us to depend on one another to accomplish the works that God wants to accomplish.

We’re all different, we have unique personalities and varying gifts and abilities and God has made it so that every one of us is necessary for the proper functioning of the body of Christ. When we came to faith in Jesus, He gave us His Spirit, and the Spirit gave us gifts which enable us to be used in building God’s Kingdom in unique and essential ways.

Just in case someone here might have struggled with the thought that you are not essential to the proper functioning of the body of Christ, the church, I’m going to share some verses with you that I hope will help you see how God intended for this to work.

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Holy Spirit is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service in the church, but it is the same Lord we are serving. There are different ways God works in our lives, but it is the same God who does the work through all of us. A spiritual gift is given to each of us as a means of helping the entire church.

To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice; to another He gives the gift of special knowledge. The Spirit gives special faith to another, and to someone else He gives the power to heal the sick. He gives one person the power to perform miracles, and to another the ability to prophesy. He gives

someone else the ability to know whether it is really the Spirit of God or another spirit that is speaking. Still another person is given the ability to speak in unknown languages and another is given the ability to interpret what is being said. It is the one and only Holy Spirit who distributes these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have. (1 Cor. 12:4-11)

Notice that these spiritual gifts are given to “each of us”, to every person who has given their heart to the Lord Jesus. Notice as well that the gifts are given so that each of us has the ability to help the entire church. They are not given so that we can put a plaque on our wall saying, “I have the gift of ...”, but so that we are equipped to serve in such a way that the church is built up and encouraged. Notice that there is great diversity in the gifts, but that the same Holy Spirit is at work in each one of them and that they are all working towards the same purpose. In other words, the gifts of the Spirit should produce unity in the church and we should be using those gifts in harmony with every other part of the body of Christ. Let’s go to the next passage:

We are all one body, we have the same Spirit, and we have all been called to the same glorious future. There is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and there is only one God and Father, who is over us all and in us all and living through us all. However, He has given each one of us a special gift according to the generosity of Christ ... (He) gave these gifts to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do His work and build up the church, the body of Christ, until we come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature and full grown in the Lord, measuring up to the full stature of Christ.

(Eph. 4:4-7;11-13)

Paul goes on from there to describe how this maturing process produces a stability in the lives of individuals and the life of the church as people are changed over time to become more like Jesus. He ends with this:

Under His direction, the whole body is fitted together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love. (Eph. 4:16)

The way the church is supposed to work is a picture of how the Christian life is supposed to work. Those who follow Jesus, who have made Him Lord of their lives, work side by side with others who have made that same decision and who are also being shaped by the Holy Spirit into the image of Christ. They are to work together in harmony, humbly submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ, using the gifts that have been given them by the Holy Spirit to serve one another in love. It’s not complicated; it’s just hard. And the reason it’s hard is because we don’t always trust the work of the Holy Spirit in the other person and sometimes we may even doubt what He’s doing in us. So we become controlling, or envious, or competitive or critical and complaining, or we just give up and try to find another group of Christians who are more like us. But this is genius - the genius of the plan of God and the cross of Christ. His goal is just as much to teach us to love one another as it is to have us working together for His glory. And by bringing us together into one body and calling us to serve others in humility and love, He is both teaching us to love one another AND He is

enabling us to work together for the benefit of the Kingdom of God. We have some rough edges; He uses our brothers and sisters to help work on them.

So, let's sum up what we've covered so far:

1. The Lord Jesus promised that, once He had gone to be with His Father, that the Holy Spirit would come on all who believed in Jesus, that He would fill us and, through us, do the works of Jesus.
2. The Spirit is making us like Jesus, but not exactly like everyone else in the Christian family. He has given us different spiritual gifts and He will use us in different ways to accomplish what God wants to accomplish through our lives.
3. Third: this whole thing only works if we see in one another the power of God and the grace of God. If we see one another as rivals, as people who are just too different from us, as people who we can't relate to or can't learn from, then we fail the test of love that is required of us. Instead we look at one another through the lens of God's Spirit at work in their lives and we discern what He wants to do in them and through them and encourage that process through prayer and words of hope. And we work side by side with each person, with the attitude of a servant, with the aim of being a partner in the Kingdom of our Lord with every one who He brings into the church.

The next big question is, "How are these gifts of the Spirit different from the talents we thought we'd always had?" If someone is really good at making blackberry pies, should we add to the list of spiritual gifts the blackberry pie-making gift, or is this a skill or talent that they could have without the Spirit's presence in their lives? You can see where that is going, can't you? The gifts of the Spirit are different than natural talents, although they may be connected in some way - we'll look at those possibilities as we look at different gifts next week.

Generally, I would say that a spiritual gift is a God-given ability to do things that you couldn't or wouldn't do before you received the Spirit. Once your heart came alive to God and the Spirit came into your being, you began to feel different passions than the ones you had before. A new desire for building the Kingdom of God was birthed in you and that hunger changed the way you went about life.

Maybe you're one of those people who loved to entertain and would often invite people over to your home for a meal and an evening of conversation, but then you became a follower of Jesus and received the Holy Spirit and a new desire began to stir inside you. You wanted to invite a different group of people to your home for a meal - from a transition house, or from no house at all. Or maybe you wanted to open your home to refugees, or children who were not being treated well in their own home, or children whose parents were in jail. Before you received the Holy Spirit, you had a talent for hospitality, but now you have received the gift of hospitality and it's taken your thought process and the desire of your heart to a whole new level.

Now, that's just an example, and maybe a bit extreme to make the point, but I want to make it clear that there is a difference between our talents or our interests, the things

we enjoyed before we ever came to faith, and the new passion that is inspired by the Holy Spirit and that guides us into ministry in the name of Jesus. That should help us when it comes to identifying our gifts and the ministries that flow from those gifts.

Now, let's look at some applications:

1. The most important and immediate application is that you must see how vital you are to the whole body of Christ. The descriptions of the gifts of the Spirit in these passages indicate that every gift is important, and therefore every person has an important role to play if the church is going to function as it's supposed to. Bottom line: you are an important part of the body and if you're not involved, then the body isn't as healthy and isn't functioning as fully as it should be.
2. The second application for today is that every person who has come to faith in Jesus has been gifted by the Spirit of the Living God! That means that you have gifts to give, ways of enriching the body of Christ and making its ministry move forward. No one is left out of this picture. There is not one who can say, "I'm not important; I don't have a spiritual gift; I'm only a spectator here." You are a gifted person, not just with talents and insights and a winning personality, but with the special gifts of the Holy Spirit - which we'll start looking into in more depth in coming weeks.
3. And the third application I have for you today is that there are huge implications in these verses for how the church functions as the body of Christ. I'll mention just three: we have to walk humbly with God and one another, no one setting themselves up as being better or more important, than others. Secondly, we have to develop a cooperative spirit, where we allow others a place to use their spiritual gifts and where we make room for people with gifts similar to our own. Third, we have to be seeking, and submitted to, whatever Jesus wants. Decision-making, on the big scale or the small one, can't be about my personal preference, but about our Lord's desire