

The Gifts of the Spirit

This week we want to start looking at the specific gifts of the Holy Spirit. What are they and what will it look like if they are being used to build up the body of Christ? I want to start by listing the gifts as they are listed in the letters of Paul, work through the five-fold ministry gifts of Ephesians and then close with a quick look at the possibility that there are any number of other spiritual gifts not described in these passages.

Let's start with Romans 12:6-8:

God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out when you have faith that God is speaking through you. If your gift is that of serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, do a good job of teaching. If your gift is to encourage others, do it! If you have money, share it generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

Nowhere in this passage does Paul use the phrase “gifts of the Spirit”. The Holy Spirit is not mentioned in these verses, but His activity is clearly being described. Both the gift of prophecy and the gift of teaching are included in the list in 1 Corinthians where they are described as gifts of the Spirit, given for the common good. And here Paul refers simply to “gifts” and “abilities” and he introduces the whole discussion with the sentence, “God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well.”

Next, we turn to two passages in 1 Corinthians 12, which include a lot of overlap, but which mention a few distinct gifts as well. First, we'll start at v. 8:

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. (12:8-11)

Then, later on, we'll pick it up in verse 27:

Now all of you together are Christ's body, and each one of you is a separate and necessary part of it. Here is a list of some of the members that God has placed in the body of Christ:

First are apostles, second are prophets, third are teachers, then those who do miracles, those who have the gift of healing, those who can help others, those who can get others to work together - (which, as we saw 2 weeks ago, should probably be translated as “those who give inspired guidance”) - and those who speak in unknown languages. (12:27-28)

From those two lists, these are the ones that appear only once: the gift of special knowledge, the gift of wisdom, the gift of faith, the gift of discernment, the gift of apostle, the gift of teacher and the gift of helps or service. There's an important reason for mentioning this which I'll get to later on.

The final list contains only one unique gift, and that is the gift of evangelism. The other wrinkle in Paul's list in Ephesians is that he combines the gifts of pastor and teacher into one. Let's read from Ephesians 4:

He has given each one of us a special gift according to the generosity of Christ. (v.7) 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. (11,12)

Paul presents these four, or possibly five, gifts as building blocks in the life of the church. They are the gifts that draw people into the new life (apostles and evangelists) and then help them grow to maturity in the faith (prophets and pastors and teachers). They are sometimes referred to as the "five-fold ministry" gifts. If you hear that term, think of the gifts that Paul lists in Ephesians 4.

So, let's review for a moment what we've covered so far in this series and then launch in to a look at some of the individual gifts.

We began by looking at the work of the Holy Spirit. In the history of Israel that we read about in the Old Testament, we see the Spirit coming on certain individuals at certain times to accomplish certain tasks, whether it's Bezalel to fashion all the parts of the tabernacle or Samson to destroy the temple of the Philistines. But there was a promise that came through the prophets that God's Spirit would some day come on all people, men and women, young and old. That prophecy was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost as Peter explained to the crowds in Acts 2. Since that day, the clear teaching of the church has been that the Spirit is given to all who put their faith in Jesus and who begin to follow Him.

Last time I was up here I spoke about two further aspects of the ministry of the Spirit in the lives of Christians. One is the experience of being filled with the Spirit, which seems to have taken place many times in the life of individual believers, simply from the passages we read in the early chapters of Acts. God wants us to seek Him, to be refilled, renewed, in the love and power of His Spirit. And when we are filled with the Spirit, the things we do for the sake of Jesus will produce the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. We can look at the fruit, the results, of our ministry and tell whether or not we're tracking with the Spirit, being led by Him, keeping in step with Him, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Galatian Christians.

What we should see is ministry that promotes unity with other Christians, which operates in the grace and love of our Father, which builds up individuals, not just in their personal maturity and faith in Jesus, but in their love for all others in the body of

Christ. When we see that, we should be able to stand back and look at what we've done and say to ourselves, "Wow, that doesn't look like anything I could ever accomplish through my own strength, personality or talents - I see God at work in my life."

Now, what are these gifts of the Spirit? What do we look for that would help us know the difference between a natural talent and a spiritual gift? What do all these various terms describing gifts mean?

Let's begin where we finished in listing the gifts, which is the passage in Ephesians. There, Paul refers to them as "special gifts" given by God for the building up of the church.

The first on the list is "apostle", which is based on the Greek word "apostolos", meaning "sent one" or "messenger". This is the gift from God which both inspires and enables a person to go into new areas, to start new works. It is sometimes referred to as the "missionary" gift because those who were called apostles in the early church travelled broadly, preaching the good news about Jesus and planting churches. Philip went to North Africa and Asia Minor, Andrew to the north-east into what is now Georgia and Armenia and later to Greece. Matthew was a missionary to Parthia, now called Iran and Ethiopia and Simon Peter carried the gospel to many places, eventually being martyred in Rome. Thaddaeus was a missionary to areas we now know as Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. Both Bartholomew and Thomas are said to have travelled as far as India with the gospel message and, although he wasn't a disciple of Jesus, Paul is counted among the apostles and travelled throughout the Mediterranean region, eventually being martyred in Rome. There are traditions which place Matthias in Syria, Simon the Zealot in Persia and James Alpheus in Syria.

So, if the term "apostle" is to be understood as someone who goes, who is sent out with the gospel and who establishes some new work away from the comforts of the home church, what terms would describe what today's apostles do? Missionary is the most obvious one, but we could also include people who pioneer a new movement, like the founders of Youth With a Mission or World Vision.

Prophets are, in general, people who bring a word from the Lord to the church. The Old Testament prophets brought a message from God to the whole nation of Israel while the New Testament prophets seem to be given specific messages to individuals or to local churches. An example of the individual would be the prophet Agabus who came from Judea to visit Paul and his companions on their way to Jerusalem in Acts 21. His message was this: "The Holy Spirit declares that (Paul) will be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Romans." (v.11) An example of a prophetic word for a group of people was Paul's specific instruction to the commanding officer and soldiers on the ship that was transporting him to face trial in Rome. As they prepared to abandon ship during a storm and were lowering the lifeboats, Paul said, "You will all die unless the sailors stay aboard." (Acts 27:31) They stayed on board and, although the ship broke apart, not one life was lost.

We'll have more to say about the spiritual gift of prophecy later on in this series, but this introduction simply says that someone with a prophetic gift will, from time to time, bring a message from God.

Evangelism is the next gift mentioned in Ephesians 4 and we have to see this in the context here: the person with the gift of evangelism is one who equips people to do the work of an evangelist. "Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do His work and build up the church, the body of Christ." So the evangelist isn't someone we just send out to talk to those outside the faith, but is one we learn from about how we can reach our friends and neighbours who haven't yet accepted the good news of God's salvation. He or she will probably be very active in leading others to faith, but that isn't the focus of these verses from Ephesians - the focus is on equipping others.

That is also the focus of the spiritual gifts of pastor and teacher. The Greek word that we translate as "pastor" is also the word translated "shepherd", which indicates the kind of ministry that is involved with using a spiritual gift of pastor. This is a person who enjoys being with people, who prays for people and helps them deal with the challenges that a life of faith brings. He or she may not have that "word from the Lord" that brings insight into a person's situation and need for direction - that's a different spiritual gift - but they will offer counsel, prayer, encouragement and support as they're able.

The teaching ministry is closely associated with the pastor or shepherd gift because the teaching of God's word can be brutal if it's not done with a caring heart. Imagine a teacher who didn't have compassion for the people in the pews - or stackable chairs - taking the congregation through the letters to the seven churches in Revelation. That person could inspire guilt and fear in every lesson and lead people to an unhealthy view of God and a shame-based motivation for obedience, which isn't healthy or sustainable.

It's interesting how many areas require a teaching gift. If you're a counsellor, you need to be able to teach your clients how to respond to challenging events in life, how to make good decisions, how to have a healthy perspective on your circumstances. If you're a doctor, you need to be able to teach people how to take care of themselves, how to live healthy lives. If you're in any area that requires effective communication, the gift of teaching is vital. The spiritual gift of teaching means that you have a gift for communicating truth in ways that people are able to apply to their own lives. The test is being able to see the fruit of your teaching as people understand it, apply it and make it a part of their daily walk of faith.

So these are foundational gifts, the equipping of the Holy Spirit that enables churches to get started and to begin to grow towards maturity, but that doesn't make them "everything". We can't rely on a prophet to make people feel welcomed and needed, nor can we rely on a pastor and teacher to know what God is saying to a specific person or to a specific need in the church. Every gift is needed - and therefore, every gifted person, every believer, is also needed.

The big question that faces each of us as individuals is the question, "What has God gifted me to do? If I'm an indispensable part of the body of Christ, what IS my part and how do I fulfill that role to the glory of God? Those are the important questions and we'll be better able to answer them if we understand a couple of things: how has God made us? (and therefore what has He given us a passion to do with our lives?) and, what do the various gifts look like in practice?

If your gift is apostle, you will have a passion for breaking new ground in ministry, for starting a work among an unreached people group or a mission that does ministry in a new way or something along those lines. You'll be a pioneer and have a hunger to open doors to the gospel in new areas or in new ways.

As I mentioned earlier, if your gift is prophecy, you will learn more about it in a couple of weeks.

If your gift is evangelism, you will find great joy in sharing the good news of God's great acts of saving mercy to many, many people. You'll invite them to events where the gospel is being shared, will chat about what Jesus has meant in your own life, will easily talk about the reasons for your faith. And the fruit of exercising that gift is that people will become followers of Jesus and other Christians will learn from you how to reach their friends and neighbours and family members with the good news.

You may be gifted as a pastor, but not particularly as a teacher. A pastor will shepherd people, leading them to places where they can find rest, where they can be refreshed with spiritual food and water and where they are protected from the enemy. A person with the spiritual gift of teaching will bring God's word alive, helping the person who is listening both to understand it and to obey the word that is given.

You can see from these examples that there is more than just an ability involved here. There is also a strong desire that is birthed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit's presence and by the gifts that He gives. So, it becomes important for us to understand what we are motivated by, inspired by. When we have a good sense of what we want to see happen and combine that with an awareness of how God has equipped us to do these things, we are close on the trail of knowing our spiritual gifts.

One more thing before we close for today. There is no reason to suppose that the various lists of gifts contain every possible working of the Holy Spirit. None claims to be "the exhaustive list" and none includes all the others - so they are listings of gifts. You can't say that 1 Corinthians lists all the gifts, or that Romans does, because neither is complete. All of that tells us that there are likely many more gifts of the Spirit that are available to the church today.

One of those would be the anointing to lead people into worship, an anointing of the Spirit, a gift given by the Spirit, whereby a person's presence draws others to worship and adore their God. Another would be the gift of hospitality, a gift for opening one's home to others, whether people in physical need, such as refugees or orphans, or in

spiritual need, such as the lonely, or those needing the encouragement and support of Christian community. Another Holy Spirit-inspired gift would be in the creative arts, like the Old Testament artist Bezalel who crafted the tabernacle and all the components used for Israel's worship, including the Ark of the Covenant. Another person might have a special gift for giving vision or hope to an individual or a group. So the New Testament lists aren't intended to be exhaustive - there is room in the overarching work of the Holy Spirit for more than what we read about in these three passages.

Our application for today is pretty basic. Pray that God would show you what He has made you to do for Him, for His Kingdom. Ask Him to give you a vision for ministering to others that "fits" how He has made you. Then share with a few others, maybe two or three or four at the most, what you are hearing from the Lord. If you don't sense any direction, then take that prayer home with you and keep it going. If you do, then look for confirmation and clarification from the people you share with. Someone may see a specific way in which you can use that gift while someone else might just say, "I can see that."