

Understanding the Gifts

We've looked at the gifts that Paul mentions in his letter to the Ephesians and now we'll take some time to go through the gifts from Paul's letters to both Rome and Corinth. There are many of them, so I'll have to just give an overview, but it may be helpful to see them in groups.

The first one I want to look at today is the one that appears on both lists, the gift of "serving" or "helps". Some interpreters of the text have seen in this word something formal and specific, like the office of serving as a deacon, a recognized position even in the early church. But that's to read too much into it. The clearer sense is offered by one of the early Church Fathers, John Chrysostom, who was the archbishop of Constantinople for a brief period around the end of the fourth century. He said that every spiritual work is a work of service. To minister under the leading of the Holy Spirit is to serve Jesus and to serve His Body, the Church, and to serve the cause of the Kingdom of His Father.

And while I agree with that general sentiment, I see the spiritual gift of serving others as distinct from that broad, general understanding of serving others. The spiritual gift of service is the gift of seeing what needs to be done and then doing it. The servant will move to meet the need long before most people will be aware that there is a need. While you and I are chatting with the folks around us after church, the servant is already loading the dishwasher and stacking the chairs. This person doesn't wait for someone to say, "We're looking for volunteers to help with the cleanup," but sees that there is a need and gets in there and does what needs to be done.

You may not be wired that way. If you're not, you won't be thinking about those kinds of needs, but God supplies that gift in good measure throughout His church and so the necessary things get done.

The next gift from the Romans list is the spiritual gift of encouragement or exhortation. This is that stirring, given by the Holy Spirit, to speak words to others in the church that will build them up, lift their spirits, bring them hope. There is no more obvious "sign of the times", despite all the opportunities we have or the wealth we enjoy, than the reality that people are facing discouragement, that they don't feel appreciated on a deep level and that depression is an epidemic in our society, and not just among the young. Against all of the negativity that surrounds life in the Western world in the twenty-first century comes this wonderful gift of encouragement, a gift given by the Holy Spirit with the goal of building others up. Sometimes the word is translated "exhortation" which means to urge people on to overcome their obstacles or to press on in doing the good things that God has given them the opportunity to do. With this gift, you're urging people on, telling them that, with God, all things are possible. You're building faith, building hope, strengthening your sister or brother, helping them see possibilities instead of potential disasters.

Next on our list is the gift of giving, the spiritual gift of being generous. There are people who want to bless with their financial means, who look for opportunities to support people and projects and who find great joy in giving. You don't need to be wealthy to walk in this gift, only to be generous. But I've observed that many people who have a gift of giving, who are generous in their attitudes to material things, are likely to experience financial blessing. I think that God likes to prosper those who have this spiritual gift and the heart attitude that springs from it. This generosity is not about looking good or making the big splash, but comes from a genuine concern for the well-being of others, especially the poor.

Finally from Romans, we come across the spiritual gift of leadership. The NLT reads: "If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously." (Romans 12:8) The word used here for leadership is not describing a specific role within the church, but is a broad term that can be applied to any sphere where one person leads others. So it can refer to parents giving leadership to their home life, to people leading in the work place or the community or taking that kind of role in various areas of Christian ministry. How can you tell if someone is gifted for leadership? You might feel drawn to go where they're going, for one thing, but a more general way of seeing gifted leadership is that there is no shortage of people willing to follow. Jesus led twelve men all over the dusty roads of Galilee and Judea, with no benefits plan, no pension plan, not a lot of obvious perks, but because He was a leader of men, they followed Him, later risking their lives to proclaim His gospel throughout their world.

We'll deal with mercy next week, so let's move over to the lengthy lists of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12. These gifts are, by their nature, more obviously supernatural than, say, a gift like service or exhortation or giving. Those are more difficult to confuse with natural talents or abilities gained by experience.

The first of the gifts listed in 12:8 is the "word of wisdom". Some of those commentators who would rather not have anything supernatural in the Bible, or at least not anything where human beings could be asked to do supernatural things, interpret this gift as one form of the gift of teaching, the ability to teach the wisdom of Scripture. But that is really not any different from the spiritual gift of teaching. There is no reason to suppose that someone who teaches the wisdom of Scripture has a different gift than the person who teaches the truths of the Bible.

I think the Pentecostal interpretation of this gift makes the most sense. According to that view, the word of wisdom is a word from God, given by the Holy Spirit, that helps a group of people to resolve a difficult issue. Pentecostal theologian Donald Gee writes about the effect of this gift, "One is deeply conscious that the supremely right thing has been said and the true course of action indicated." Wisdom has the effect of bringing everything into perspective and offering a godly view of life and its purposes. The word of wisdom has that same effect, bringing into clear view the heart of the issue that needs to be decided and shows us how to get there.

An example might be in a home Bible Study group where there are differing opinions being expressed about a passage of Scripture. A couple of the people involved in the discussion have strong and long-held opinions about the meaning of the passage, but they are on opposite sides of the debate. As the heat rises, the clarity is getting less and less until one person, who cares about the topic but isn't angry about it, offers a word of wisdom that changes the atmosphere in the room. Maybe the word is, "Remember that the context for this passage is the unity of the church, that we are called to humility and grace with one another - now, where were we." All of a sudden, the emotion has gone from the task of proving a point and has moved into being united, humble, forgiving.

The word of knowledge is simply a revelation of knowledge that a person did not have before and could not have based on their experience. Let's say you're in a small group after church and you're praying for the gifts of the Spirit and suddenly you have a strong impression that you are to pray for something you hadn't thought about in weeks, something obscure like drug smuggling on the west coast of Vancouver Island. I know of a group where that happened and they turned to prayer for God to intervene in some unknown drug smuggling operation off the coast and later heard that the next day a fishing boat had been boarded by the coast guard and very large quantities of drugs had been seized.

Imagine that that had happened to you. You're in a meeting, talking and praying about other things and then you get this sense about praying for God to stop some illegal drugs from entering Canada. What do you think you would say? Would you be inclined to brush it off and think, "That's just for me - my thoughts, my concerns" or would you speak it out and ask the rest of the group to join you in prayer for this issue because you felt you had a word of knowledge from the Holy Spirit that was directed to the whole group? Sometimes you'll just know - and sometimes you'll need to ask the Lord what He wants.

It's been said that the word of knowledge is one of the more common gifts of the Spirit, that it's available to any believer who asks God to speak through us. I don't have an "expert opinion" on that, but I've heard it enough from people who walk in this gift that I think there's something to it. It seems to be dependent on a person's courage and our willingness to ask God to speak.

A few of us were at CLA in Langley a few weeks ago to hear Mike Pilavachi who spoke and then invited people to receive prayer. But he didn't make a general invitation, but made some very specific invitations. One that I remember was an invitation to a person who had been to the doctor, not the day before, but a week and a day ago and this person had gotten some bad news and God wanted to touch them. That's really specific - and someone went forward at that invitation. Someone went forward for every invitation he gave that night and lots of them were specific words of knowledge. Mike Pilavachi also teaches on how to receive these words and he says that it's never easy because it seldom if ever appeals to the rational mind. It always involves faith, but when we step out in faith we find ourselves growing in faith and we find God is

faithful. And, he says, the worst that can happen is that we're wrong, and then we go and pray for somebody else. Nobody dies, no one is hurt, we just learn and move on.

The next gift listed in 1 Corinthians 12 is discerning of spirits. This refers to a God-given ability to see whether a person is speaking or acting under the anointing of the Holy Spirit or is being directed by a different spirit. This one can get a bit tricky, because there are many of us who are quick to judge what we see and are too quick to say, "That's not from God", just because it is unusual or makes us uncomfortable.

The gift of spiritual discernment should not be confused with a critical or judgmental spirit - and yet, that has happened in the Christian church many times. In the 1980's there were two brothers in the Lower Mainland who were ministers. One taught that the gifts were for today and prayed for people to be filled with the Spirit and to speak in tongues. The other spoke against that belief and prayed for people to be delivered from what he called the demonic gift of tongues. That's confusing! Having the gift of discernment operating in the church is incredibly helpful in dealing with situations where people have differences of opinion about one text or passage, but the gift has to be recognized and respected.

Next on our list is the gift of faith. We all have faith, of course; that's what got us on this journey. But the spiritual gift of faith is exercised in the context of a specific situation. Maybe it will be in a situation where people are unable to take action because they are filled with fear. Maybe it will be in response to confusion about what direction to take because the options all seem impossible. The gift of faith responds to situations that seem overwhelming and simply asks God what He wants to do about it, while others are checking their calculators and spread sheets and the Weather Network. The gift of faith is the gift that inspires people to ask God for His direction and then to act on what He reveals. You believe that He speaks (that's the first level of faith) and then that He's spoken to you (that's taking it a step further) and then that He expects you to act on what you've heard from Him (and that's where you see the gift of faith in action).

Next on our list is the gift of healing. This is an interesting one because all of us pray for people who are sick or injured and we all pray with faith, or at least a hope, that God will bring healing. But some people regularly see people healed in response to their prayers. They have a growing expectation that God will heal and so they pray boldly, confidently. There are some who seem to have a special anointing from God to pray for specific kinds of needs. One person I've heard of used to say that God used him to heal people with neck and back pain. A couple I know well has had quite a number of answers to prayer for people who are having trouble conceiving a child.

The gift of healing is a wonderful way to introduce people to Jesus. Even the act of being prayed for gives people the sense of being loved and then, when God acts to heal the person, they are often able to begin a relationship with Him.

The same is also true of the next gift on the list, the gift of miracles. You might think that because we don't see many miracles today that this gift isn't available any more,

but there are many accounts from around the world of the miraculous taking place. I've heard a first-hand account of the miraculous multiplication of food as person after person came and served from the same, nearly-depleted pots of food until nearly 100 were fed. A priest in Sri Lanka was released from prison after praying for rain during a severe drought in that nation. Witnesses said, "Before he rose from his prayers, abundance of rain began to fall." In the last century, a Christian farmer in China began to weep in prayer as he saw his crops dying from lack of rain. Suddenly he saw a bright, beautiful light and a voice spoke to him, "Fear not. On the fourth of the seventh month you shall have rain." He was so sure that God had spoken that he announced it to all his neighbours, and sure enough, on the appointed day, the rains came. Some have prayed for tornadoes to change course and they have obeyed. God has filled an empty well with clear water in response to prayer. And there's the testimony of Dr. Kay Fountain who found her and her team in another location after she had prayed. Although not common, the gift of miracles would be similar to faith or healing in that one hears from God, believes what is heard and then acts on it.

The next two gifts from 1 Corinthians 12 are the gifts of speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues. Speaking in tongues appears in the New Testament almost like two different gifts - one is praising God in an earthly language that is unknown to you, but may be known to others. You don't know what you're saying, but someone else might. That's what happened with the followers of Jesus who were filled with the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The second kind of tongues is referred to by the apostle Paul as "speaking with the tongues of angels". This is a language that would be unknown to the person speaking or to anyone else within hearing range - it is known only to God. People refer to this as their prayer language and it is incredibly helpful when you run out of words or if words themselves can't express your inner feelings. In that case tongues is a way of praying from your spirit to God's Spirit - and Paul refers to it that way. The gift of interpretation is valuable in a setting such as public worship when a tongue is spoken before the congregation and someone who hears it is able to give the sense of what has been said to the rest of those gathered. Paul addresses the use of tongues and interpretation in public settings in 1 Corinth. 14.

I know these are all too brief, but we come to the end of this list with the spiritual gift of helping people to work together, sometimes called "administration", but admin. is not too exciting and doesn't really convey the sense of what Paul is describing here. This is the gift of helping people work together as a team, to accomplish the task set before them and to function in their gifts, in their strengths. The person with this gift is able to organize tasks and help the people doing those tasks understand teamwork and goals. They will build something together, whether a place of worship or a ministry or an outreach, that will be beautiful - not just in the fruit it brings but in the way it was built - with harmony, with love, with appreciation for the gifts of others.

So, there's a long catalogue of spiritual gifts that were known and commended in the early church. What should we do with a list like that? What will you think or do differently because we've looked at two biblical lists of gifts of the Holy Spirit? I want

to close today with some suggestions of things you can do right away, and going forward, in response to these gifts.

The first is to pray, specifically to ask God for a fuller understanding of how He has made you and what He has prepared for you to do. Part of that prayer is, of course, a prayer for understanding how the Spirit has gifted you and why.

The second is to pay close attention to Paul's words at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 14. He has just spent all of chapter 13 talking about the priority of love and how it should be the guiding principle in all we do in ministry, in the way we express the gifts of the Spirit - that's what 1 Corinthians 13 is all about! Now he says this:

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. (14:1)

So there's something you can do: eagerly desire the gifts of the Spirit. Pursue knowing them, using them and growing in ministering through these gifts.

The third thing you can do is to talk with some folks who sit near you during the service about what you're sensing God has been saying to you during this series. Sometimes sharing something that seems personal and asking people for feedback takes the pride element down a notch or two and allows you to receive helpful insights from your brothers and sisters. So let's take a few moments to do that and then we'll head into another week.