



A Study of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

Lesson 18: Now Concerning Spiritual Gifts... 1 Corinthians 12:1-26

Now one of the things you learn when you study literature is that most literature follows a fairly standardized pattern. For example, when you study fiction you learn pretty quickly that most novels follow a pattern that includes the following elements. A novel will usually start off with something called *exposition*...that is the setting will be introduced...and some of the characters will be introduced and the reader will get a general idea of what is going on in the story. After that, the story will introduce something called *rising action*...that means it will introduce or describe some sort of conflict...or perhaps a number of conflicts that are going on between the characters or between the characters and their environment. After that, the story will build toward a *climax* in which the main character will be forced to make a decision or face a crisis based on some sort of the conflict he faces. After that the story will develop the result of the main character's decision...something called *falling action*. And after that, the story wraps up with something called the *denouement*...the part of the story that resolves all the conflict and releases the reader from whatever tension has been built up for them in reading the story.

Now I am making the point because this morning we come to the last great section of 1 Corinthians. The book itself goes on for another five chapters but don't let that confuse you. It is really just one large section comprised of two or three inter-related ideas. Another way to say the same thing is that in this section, chapters 12-16, Paul finally reaches the climax or crisis point of his argument against the Corinthians. That is, he finally gets to the heart of his concern for what is going on at Corinth. I think it is fair to say that he finally gets to the thing that has put a burr under his saddle in the first place. Now I am not alone in drawing that conclusion. A number of commentators understand this section to contain Paul's principle concern for the Corinthians.

For example Gordon Fee writes this;

This section is... probably the most important from Paul's point of view because here in particular the differences between him and them come to a head, especially over what it means to be "**spiritual**." That seems also to be the reason for the close relationship between these chapters and the final issue—the future bodily resurrection of believers (chap. 15). Together these four chapters bring the letter, with all of its preceding arguments, to a fitting climax. Being "spiritual" in the present means to edify the community in worship (chaps. 12–14), for the perfect has not yet come (13:8-13); and when it does come, it will include the resurrection of the body, even though as a "**spiritual body**" (chap. 15).¹

I think were we better readers we might have guessed right along where Paul was headed. I think we might have at least guessed the general direction of where he was headed. We perhaps should have seen it foreshadowed in those passages where he focused on the issue of the Corinthians' spiritual giftedness...passages like 1 Corinthians 1:4.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 1:4...** I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that *in every way* you were enriched in him in *all speech and all knowledge*-- ⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you-- ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Or passages like 1 Corinthians 4:8:²

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 4:8...**Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!

You see what is apparent, and I made this point more than once, is that the Corinthians thought they had arrived spiritually. They thought they were spiritual people...spiritually mature and spiritually advanced in every aspect of their lives³. They thought that their heightened spirituality freed them to do whatever they wanted to do individually. They thought that their deep spirituality made them immune to the dangers of being involved with sin and pagan idolatry. They thought that their deep spirituality allowed them to pursue their own individual interests regardless of the impact it had on everyone else around them. In other words, they believed their own individual spiritual maturity and giftedness was designed for their own individual growth and fulfillment and had nothing to do with the other believers at Corinth. And what we are going to see in the next three chapters is that they believed their ability to speak in tongues was the crowning proof of their genuine spirituality,

Now what Paul has been doing right along through the book of Corinthians is taking their idiotic argument apart one layer at a time.

If you think back over the book of Corinthians you can sort of get a 30, 000 foot overview of what I mean.

In the first few chapters of 1 Corinthians, he had to admonish them for their tendency to break up into small, competing groups. They were more concerned about how their groups ministered to them individually than how they might minister to each other.

After that, Paul had to demand that the Corinthians kick a man guilty of incest out of their congregation. They had the idea that such sin had no effect on them...that their spiritual maturity protected them from any sort of consequences from being involved with such behavior.

And on and on Paul goes...taking their questions and not so much informing them about what was right or wrong as taking them to task for their spiritual immaturity and lack of discernment.

And we saw Paul's argument reach a whole new threshold a couple of weeks ago when we came to that section at the beginning of chapter 10 when Paul reminded the Corinthians about what happened to their disobedient fathers in the wilderness. You see Paul more or less told the Corinthians, **"You do realize that your father's bleached bones in the middle of the desert came as a result of their pagan idolatry and disobedience, don't you?"**

Now after Paul asked that question he also came right out and told the Corinthians that they were absolutely no longer permitted to attend pagan feasts. But he didn't stop there. After that he went even farther and told the Corinthians

that they were mishandling the Lord's Table and were failing to discern the Lord's body for what it was. He did that hammering their spiritual ignorance demonstrating their inability to rightly discern and care for the poor in their midst. His conclusion at the end of chapter eleven was pretty compelling especially when he connected the deaths of some of their members to their inability to rightly consider the other members of Christ's body. What he was doing was connecting the deaths of some of the Corinthians to the deaths of their fathers in the wilderness...something that surely must have gotten their attention.

Now this morning we are moving as I said earlier to the next and final part of Paul's argument against the Corinthians. He is going to confront them in this last section regarding the very nature of what it means to be spiritual. He is going to confront them concerning the very nature of why God gives spiritual gifts to men and women in the first place. And what Paul is going to say in a nutshell is this, **"Spiritual gifts are given to the church...to Christ's body in order to build it up and edify it. That is, they are given for the common good. You are not permitted to pick one gift out that you think is more important than all the others and go to seed on it. As a matter of fact, you are not allowed to pick at all. God sovereignly determines the spiritual gifts He gives out and He does so according to His own plan and design. This is one place where your own uncrucified lusts for power and preeminence are not taken into account and you would know that if you were anywhere near as spiritually minded as you think you are."**

Now I am sure that sounds harsh to you...but it isn't really. What it is...is eminently honest. And Paul is going to hammer that sort of honesty throughout the chapter. You can see that even at the very beginning of chapter twelve.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 12:1...** Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.

Now before I get into any sort of detail about the passage I should tell you that there is a controversy regarding the translation of the phrase **“spiritual gifts”** that you see there in your Bibles. The problem is that it is impossible to tell from the word itself whether it is neuter...related to *things* or masculine...related to *men* or *people*. The two forms of the words are spelled exactly the same. If you take as neuter then Paul is saying, **“I don’t want you to be ignorant regarding spiritual things that is gifts.”** If you take it as masculine then Paul is saying, **“I don’t want you to be ignorant regarding what it means to be a spiritual kind of person.”**

The problem is made even worse by the fact that both ideas come up in the text. In 1 Corinthians 14:37, Paul uses the word where it is clearly masculine because of its connection to the word **“prophet”**.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 14:37...**If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.

In 1 Corinthians 14:1, Paul uses the word where it is clearly neuter because of its connection to the word **“prophecy.”**

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 14:1...**Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.

Either way Paul starts off chapter 12 by saying, **“Brothers, I don’t want you to be ignorant regarding spiritual gifts or spiritual men so I am going to take some**

time to discuss the matter.” The implication of such a statement is that as they stand at the moment, they are indeed quite ignorant when it comes to such things.

Now what follows verse one is a remarkably strange couple of verses for modern readers. Look at them with me.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 12:1...** Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. ² You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. ³ 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.

Now what Paul is talking about are the pagan parades or pomps that the Corinthians would have known so well. You see in Paul's day, followers of Athena or Apollo or other gods would get together on certain days of the year to celebrate their gods. They walked in a long ceremonial parade and took offerings or sacrifices from some starting point to the local temple of the god being worshipped.

One commentator, Terence Paige, write this:

The language *gives* the image of a cultic festival procession in which the participants normally proceeded along a sacred route, led by priests and other celebrants, those carrying cult objects or a cult image. Such processions must have been fairly common: 'hardly a festival is without its *pompe*', notes W. Burkert, and it would be hard to imagine so much as a month passing without at least one festival in a city as large as Corinth. The *pompe* normally made its way through the most public area of the city and ended at a sanctuary where sacrifices were offered to the god. Alternatively the culmination of the procession could be other cultic activities, such as a 'viewing' of cult images in the theater or a bathing of the image.⁴

You see what Paul is saying is that the Corinthians are not very far removed from having been led around like dumb animals in idolatrous parades and that because that is true and because they are so spiritually immature they need to start with some basics.

Calvin puts it like this:

He proves from their own experience, that those things in which they gloried, are bestowed upon men through the exercise of God's favor; for he reminds them how ignorant they were, and stupid, and destitute of all spiritual light, previously to God's calling them. Hence it appears, that whatever they had been furnished had been furnished — not by nature, but through God's unmerited goodness.⁵

Charles Hodge writes this:

Here, as in Ephesians 2:11, the apostle contrasts the former with the present condition of his readers. Formerly, they were Gentiles, now they were Christians. Formerly, they were the worshippers and consulters of dumb idols, now they worshipped the living and true God. Formerly, they were swayed by a blind, unintelligent impulse, which carried them away, they knew not why nor whither; now they were under the influence of the Spirit of God. Their former condition is here references as a reason why they needed instruction on this subject. It was one on which their previous experience gave them no information.⁶

You see what Paul is going to say is that they need to start with the basics. And the basics are that it is not the ability to speak in tongues or any sort of ecstatic utterance that matters. Rather it is the content of what is being said that matters.

You see 1 Corinthians 12-14 is going to contain Paul's response to the Corinthians infatuation with speaking in tongues. It is going to concern their infatuation with

the spiritual giftedness in using the language of angels and Paul is going to point right here at the start that it is not how something is said that matters but rather the content of what is said that matters and he does that by pointing out that no one can curse Jesus by the Spirit of God and no one call Jesus Lord but by that Spirit of God. Now Paul is not just referring to the mouthing of the words, **“Jesus is Lord”** as evidence of having the Spirit of God...he is not just referring to the empty mouthing of the words themselves...any pagan idolater can mouth the words...but they cannot say them and mean them...they cannot say them as a heartfelt confession of faith except through the Spirit of God. On the other hand no one can who really possesses the Spirit of God could ever wish **“Jesus to be accursed.”**

You see what Paul is doing here at the very start of his argument is minimizing the importance of spiritually ecstatic utterance as an evidence of the presence of the Spirit. What Paul is going to build to...what Paul is ultimately going to insist on is that the focus on edification and not drawing attention to themselves. That fits perfectly well with the nature of Paul’s correction toward the Corinthians so far. You see even when they were pagans they were used to hearing tongues and ecstatic utterance...what Paul is wondering is why they have chosen that particular thing to infatuate themselves. It is not how they say what they say, rather it is simply what they say and believe that matters.

David Garland writes this:

For the Corinthians, the effects of the Spirit were most apparent when the Spirit manifested itself in an unusual way, such as speaking in tongues. For Paul, the Spirit of God “helps us understand the thoughts of God and his gracious acts toward us” (2:12) and results in this confession. Anyone who utters that

confession (not just mouthing the words but making a self-involving confession of the lordship of Jesus) is ipso facto living in the sphere of the Holy Spirit's power.

This confession is not some spontaneous, ecstatic utterance that anyone could blurt out. It affirms the majesty of Jesus as the one raised from the dead to become the one universal Lord above all other so-called lords (8:6). It declares absolute allegiance to him and accepts his absolute authority over every aspect of life. Paul's purpose is to identify who qualifies as spiritual. He is not dealing with the question of how to judge inspired speech. He counters those who think that the true mark of the spiritual person is that one engage in inspired speech. He wants to affirm from the start that all the members of the body of Christ are spiritual.⁷

Now what Paul is going to turn to next is the truth that the gifts of the Spirit are the gifts of the great triune God. Look at what he says in verse 4.

ESV 1 Corinthians 12:4...Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.

Now his point is that there is a variety of gifts but the gifts are utilized in the common integrated design of the Triune god. The gifts are distributed by the interworking and agreement of the Trinity in such a way to cause the building up of the Body of Christ. There is a diversity of gifts distributed by the Triune God but that diversity is used in a coherent, intelligent, and unified way. The passage obviously points out the contrast between the way the Trinity works in unison to advance a common goal and the way the Corinthians do not. You can tell that from verse 7.

ESV 1 Corinthians 12:7...To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

You see Paul will not let the point go. The issue for him is the common good...the benefit for the community of faith...the benefit for the body of Christ. It is the same argument that he used in chapter eleven...when Christians come together and despise poorer brothers they are not rightly taking into account the body of Christ. In the same way when they come together and some brother gets swept up in the thought of speaking in tongues while forgetting the brothers around him... he too is failing to rightly discern the body. The issue is always the common good and the common edification of the saints. That is, Paul's point is that the gifts of the Spirit are given for the good of the whole body...and in doing so they glorify Christ.

I think that is why I love the illustration Dr. Criswell once used about this very idea.

When a man is filled with the Spirit of God, that's what he does—He magnifies the Lord Jesus; he witnesses to the grace of God in Christ Jesus; he rejoices in the wonderful Savior of the world. That's the work of the Holy Spirit of God—magnifying Jesus, glorifying Jesus.

I read this last week of a little boy who was lame and crippled in his feet. And they took the little lad to a marvelous and wonderful doctor, a surgeon. And the surgeon healed the boy by the grace of God—made the little boy well and whole by the grace of God. And when the little fellow came home, all the folks round were rejoicing that the physician had been able to heal the little boy. He was perfectly sound, and whole, and well again.

And they'd say to the little fellow, as they'd talk to him, something about the hospital. And he'd say in reply about the hospital, but he'd always add: "But you should have seen that wonderful doctor."

Then somebody else would talk to him about the kind nurses. And he would say something about the kind nurses. Then he'd always say: "**But you should have seen that wonderful doctor.**"

And then somebody would talk to him about the flowers and about the cards. And he'd acknowledge that. Then he'd always add: **"But you should have known that wonderful doctor."**

Then somebody would speak to him about the visitors who came to see him. And he'd comment about all the visitors that came to see him. Then the little boy would add: **"But you should know that wonderful doctor."**

That's the way it is with the Holy Spirit of God in our lives. Always; He says: **"But ye ought to know the wonderful Jesus. You ought to see the face of that glorious Lord."** He magnifies the Lord Jesus. He honors and glorifies Christ our Savior. That is the work of the Holy Spirit of God!

Now, it is not thinkable—it is not reasonable—that the Holy Spirit of God should do one thing, that thing, glorifying the Lord Jesus and that the gifts of the Holy Spirit of God should do something else. They would be the same.

If the great assignment of the Holy Spirit of God is to magnify the Lord Jesus, why, then the gifts, the grace gifts of the Holy Spirit of God in us, are to do the same thing. They also are to magnify the Lord Jesus, to witness to the Lord Jesus, to bring men and women to the Lord Jesus.⁸

Now that is Paul's point that the gifts of the Spirit of God are given for the common good and that means to glorify Christ and to build up His body in the church. Now it is not as though all those gifts are the same. They are different. They are as diverse as they can be. You can see that in verses 8-11.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 12:8**...For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

Now Paul's point is not the individual number of possible gifts. He names nine here and five of them do have to do with speaking or proclamation. But he probably could have named nine thousand gifts of the Spirit as easily as he named these nine. But He is not trying to give any sort of authoritative list. Rather he is trying to point that these gifts...first this gift to that one...and that gift to another...and still that gift to another...are given by the Spirit of God as He chooses. You see Paul is trying to get the Corinthians not to focus on just one particular gift...in their case speaking with tongues...but rather on the fact that there is a wonderful diversity of gifts in the body of Christ and that the gifts are spread out over the entire body. For Paul that diversity is made as broad as it is so that it help edify and unite the body. That's the point Paul makes in verse 12.

ESV 1 Corinthians 12:12... For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

You see Paul's point is that there is unity in the diversity. The gifts are diverse but the body is unified and his point is that when someone gets carried away with one particular gift...like the Corinthians have with speaking in tongues...that the body is not unified but fractured. And to make his point crystal clear Paul gives this wonderful imagery of the many parts that make up a body. His point is that not all the parts are the same...and that each part has its place and value and should not cease to be what it is.

ESV 1 Corinthians 12:14... For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the

sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Now all of that is simple enough to understand. If the body of Christ all tries to have the same gift it will become a malformed freakish thing. But if members of the body exercise the gift they have been given by the Spirit of God then the body will be duly supplied with everything it needs.

I know a pastor that used to tell a story about a man in his congregation who was not only blind but almost stone-deaf. But he had not always been so. Before he lost the use of those crucial senses he had been an active believer. Later in life, after he had lost his sight and most of his hearing, he developed an acute case of osteoporosis. His osteoporosis was bad enough that he could not walk or move or even sit without it being painful. This pastor said that he was always amazed when every Sunday he would look down from the pulpit and see this old saint sitting there in his favorite pew, in pain, seeing nothing unable really to hear any of the sermon or music. He decided for the sake of the man that he would try to tell the man that if it was so painful for him to come to church, God would not hold it against him if he stayed home. He visited the old man at his home and after the old man finally came to realize it was him, the pastor leaned down and virtually shouted into the old man's ear, "**Brother, why do you keep coming to**

church. I know it's hard for you. I know you can't hear or see. I know it hurts to sit on those hard pews. You know no one will blame you if you stay at home."

At first, the old man recoiled as if he had been slapped. But then his face softened and he spoke in a soft voice, **"Preacher I have to come."**

"But why," shouted the preacher.

"Well, I have to exercise my gift."

The pastor's curiosity was raised. So he leaned down and shouted, **"And what is your gift?"**

The old man smiled, **"Well preacher, I don't rightly know. But this one thing I do know. Whatever it is, I can't exercise it if I'm sitting at home."**

I love that. It reflects something of what Paul was trying to get across in making the point about the diversity of gifts and the unity of the body. Let us pursue the gift that God has given each of us and let us do that trusting in God's sovereign wisdom to the building up and edification of His body in this place.

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians NICNT*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1987), 570.

² David R. Nichols, "The Problem of Two Level Christianity at Corinth" in *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies*, Volume 11, No. 2, Fall 1989.

³ The theological term for their mistaken ideology is called an "over realized eschatology".

⁴ Terence Page, "A Corinthians 12: 2: A Pagan Pompe?" in the *Journal for Studies of the New Testament*, 44 (1991), 59.

⁵ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, 12:2.

⁶ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, pg 262. Sage Digital Library Vol. 1-4.

⁷ David E. Garland, *1st Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 572.

⁸ <http://www.wacriswell.com/index.cfm/FuseAction/Search.Transcripts/sermon/1187.cfm>