



Catalog No. 798

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

20th Message

Gary Vanderet

February 17, 1991

## SPIRITUAL GIFTS FOR A SPIRITUAL BODY

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

In our examination of the book of 1 Corinthians we are learning how the church should function. A visitor from another planet checking on churches across the United States probably would draw a number of faulty conclusions. One would be that the church operates solely to run meetings on Sunday mornings. Everything is aimed toward that, he would surmise; the leadership focuses on that, and when the Sunday service ends, everything starts over again.

But that is a far cry from God's plan for the church. The apostle Paul declares that the purpose of the church is make visible the invisible God, and to maintain righteousness in the world. Christians, said Jesus, are the salt of the earth. Salt is a preservative, and that is what the church is meant to be in the world—a preservative to prevent the spread of corruption. The church is the secret government of the universe. Though small in number it can have tremendous impact in the world if Christians act righteously. But the church is not very salty. It has lost its impact.

The church consists of those who have been truly born of the Spirit. It is a living body, growing and developing within the world, not apart from it, touching the hurt and death of the world with the life and love of God. Once when Jesus visited the synagogue, he called for the scroll of Isaiah and read from the 61st chapter, that marvelous passage which sets out the Servant's ministry of healing and reconciliation. After he had read it, he resumed his seat and said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your presence." Now Jesus is still alive. He is still giving sight to the blind; he is still setting prisoners free; he is still giving hope and comfort, not through his own physical body, but through the bodies of men and women who are indwelt with his life.

In our studies in this 1 Corinthian letter we have come to chapters 12–14, where Paul now takes up the third and final concern, the abuse of the gift of tongues in the worship practices of the Corinthian church. In his listings of spiritual gifts in these chapters (12:8–10, 28, 29–30; 13:1–3; 14:6, 26), he is clearly preoccupied with tongues. He makes mention of the gift 14 times, and tongues is the only gift to appear in all six lists. Apparently the Corinthians felt they were spiritual if they spoke in tongues in public.

One of the common denominators of the problems in the Corinthian church was what some have called an "over-realized eschatology" (doctrines dealing with the last things: death, judgment, immortality). Christians live in a dynamic tension between an "already" view of what God has done, and a "not yet" view of what is still to come. The kingdom of God has already dawned, and the Messiah is reigning. Already the crucial victory has been won; already the final resurrection of the dead has begun in the resurrection of Jesus; already the Holy Spirit has been poured out on the church as the down payment of the promised inheritance. Nevertheless the kingdom has not yet come in its consummated fullness. Death still exercises formidable powers. Sin must be overcome. The powers of darkness war against believers with savage ferocity. The new heaven

and the new earth have not yet appeared. Maintaining this balance between the "already" and the "not yet" is crucial to the maturity of the church. If we think only in terms of what is still to come (a futurist eschatology), we not only play endless speculative games, but we also depreciate the climactic nature of the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection—events that have already taken place. We look to the future so much that we live passively and neglect to serve God with enthusiastic gratitude for what he has already accomplished in the past.

On the other hand, if we think only in terms of what Christ has already accomplished (i.e. if we focus on a realized eschatology), we will fall into many of the areas that characterized the believers at Corinth. We may feel that as "children of the King" we have the right to unqualified blessings. Remember Paul's words to the Corinthians in chapter 4: "You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and I would indeed that you had become kings so that we might also reign with you." His use of the word "already" indicates that Paul agreed that what the Corinthians believed was a valid part of the Christian message, but with this exception: it is not fully experienced in this life on earth. We have been filled, enriched, lifted to reign with Christ, but we shall not enter fully into that inheritance here and now.

One of the keys to understanding the situation in Corinth is given in 13:1, where tongues is associated with angels. The Corinthians seemed to consider themselves to be already like angels, and thus to be "truly spiritual." Speaking angelic dialects by the Spirit was evidence enough for them of their participation in the new spirituality. This is why they were so excited over this gift, and this is the concern that Paul addresses in chapters 12–14. Thus the apostle's emphasis in 12:1-11, the passage we will look at today, is on the variety of gifts given by the Spirit over against the Corinthians' preoccupation with one particular gift.

The issue in chapter 12 concerns what Paul calls "spirituals." In most translations the word gifts is added, in italics, indicating that the word is not found in the original letter. What Paul actually wrote was "now concerning 'spirituals'" (a plural adjective without any noun). The translators supplied the word "gifts" to help us understand what the apostle means. But I think in this case that's a mistake, because Paul's concern is not so much with spiritual gifts (which he will talk about in a moment), but with the way the Spirit of God works. If you read through the chapter, you will notice that the Holy Spirit is the main character. Paul's primary concern is with his ministry. And he wants us to know two things: 1) The Spirit of God leads us into a unity of the Spirit. There is a common criterion for determining what is spiritual and what is not (12:1-3). And 2) This unity is experienced through a variety of different expressions, what I have referred to as the beauty of diversity (12:4-11).

## I. The basis of a spiritual life: Our common experience (12:1-3)

Now concerning spiritual gifts brethren, I do not want you to be unaware. You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the dumb idols, however you were led. Therefore I make known to you, that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus is accursed”; and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor 12:1-3 NASB)

Here Paul is contrasting the Corinthians’ former experience in their pagan religions with their present experience as Christians. “You were led astray,” says the apostle. They were being led in various directions. Now he doesn’t say who led them. Perhaps it was various philosophies or ideas, perhaps an evil spirit, but someone was leading them astray. Ultimately, however, every path led to a “dumb idol.” This description, which occurs frequently in the OT, refers to the unresponsiveness of idols. They are dumb, they don’t speak, they don’t encourage, they don’t help, they don’t give any counsel, wisdom, or encouragement; they merely stand there. At the end of every route was a blind alley, says Paul. What an apt description of the world without Jesus Christ!

Don’t ever forget what your life was like without Jesus Christ—trying this idea or that philosophy, seeking something to satisfy you. Even when you got what you wanted you found it wasn’t very satisfying. “Destination sickness” is what someone has called this condition. You had everything you ever wanted, but you wanted nothing you had. This is what causes some men at the age of 40 to change jobs or mates—because they are bored and unhappy.

Paul contrasts that kind of existence with life in Christ, saying that the function of the Spirit of God is to lead people to one purpose—to make Jesus Christ Lord. In the words, “no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus is accursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit,” he is not concerned about unity of confession; he is not concerned about what we say, but about what we do. The Spirit of God increasingly brings us under the lordship of Christ.

Bob Munger’s helpful booklet, *My Heart, Christ’s Home*, pictures the believer’s heart like a home in which the Lord Jesus has come to dwell. That is what it means to become a Christian—the Lord Jesus comes to live in us. But there are many rooms in a home, and closets, too, that contain things we don’t want others to see. When the Lord establishes residence in our life, however, he begins to go through all the rooms one by one to clean them out. He does not come as a guest. He wants complete ownership of the house. Our lives have many different aspects: our jobs, our recreational life, our hobbies, our family life, our relationship with our families, our thought life. The Lord wants to control all these areas, and he will patiently work with us on them because we have invited him to enter and take control.

This is our increasingly common experience as Christians. Christ is becoming Lord in more and more areas of our life. The result is unity in the body. If we are all under the Lordship of Christ, then we will be able resolve our conflicts and differences.

## II. The beauty of diversity: Our unique expression (12:4-11)

Next, Paul describes how that Lordship is worked out in the world. Christ has enabled the church to embody his presence in the

world in a variety of ways that always reflect his lordship. In verses 4-7 we see the nature of that diversity

### A. The nature of diversity (12:4-7)

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (12:4-7)

Paul says Christians are different—but different is not bad. He is contrasting the variety of the gifts given with the unity of the Giver. Notice the repetition in these verses of the words “same Spirit...same Lord...same God,” with the triple usage of the phrase, “there are varieties.” Christians were not cut out with a cookie cutter, as it were. We were created by an infinitely wise and creative God.

Paul’s emphasis and logic are easy to follow. Diversity has its roots in God himself. Through his Spirit God has given diverse manifestations (gifts) to different people for the common good of the community. The triune God loves diversity, so much so, someone has remarked, that when he sends a snowstorm he makes each snowflake different. But mere humans make ice cubes! We need a fresh perspective. We need to think of the church as an orchestra, with each part making its own unique contribution to the symphonic harmony.

The Godhead works in concert. The Holy Spirit, who is himself the supreme gift of grace, gives gifts; the Lord Jesus places people in ministries; and God the Father empowers everyone.

Let us make some observations on these verses:

#### 1. Every Christian has a spiritual gift

The word “gift” comes from a root word that means “grace.” It is used as a modern Greek word for a birthday present. A spiritual gift is a graciously given gift of God, a capacity to serve the needs of others in the body of Christ. Paul is not talking about a natural talent, like athletic ability, or musical talent. It is a supernatural capacity to serve others in the body of Christ. We are not told when these gifts are given. We can assume they are imparted when the Spirit himself is imparted (at conversion), but we don’t know. Notice Paul says in verse 7, “To each one”; and in verse 11, “the Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.” In other words, no one is left out when these gifts are given. Every Christian here today has been gifted by God. At Christmas we look forward to the gifts that are waiting for us under the tree, but God at infinite cost to himself has given supernatural gifts to every one of his children. And it amazes me that people live for years as Christians and never ask themselves what their gifts are. Using our gifts, however, is what brings joy, adventure and fulfillment to our Christian lives. Because you can’t preach or serve in some organized way in the church, do not feel you are not valuable in the body of Christ. Every Christian has a supernatural capacity to serve the body.

#### 2. There are a variety of ways to use your gifts

There is an infinite variety of ministries, says the apostle. The Spirit gives the gifts, and the Lord Jesus opens up opportunities to use them. These opportunities may come through a church program, but they may not. Although we might like to have someone in leadership call upon us to do something that may not happen. But the encouraging thing is, God will open a door for ministry for you. It may be in your neighborhood, or at work, with children, teenagers, or older people. There are infinitely diverse ways that the Spirit will inspire his servants to minister.

I hope we will never fall into thinking that the only way to operate a ministry is our way. Different organizations and different churches have different perspectives and uniquenesses that God uses. We are not in conflict with Valley Church or First Baptist Los Altos or Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. Each of those places has unique emphases that God is blessing. There is a place for Campus Crusade for Christ, with their emphasis on evangelism; for Intervarsity, with their emphasis on Bible study; and for Navigators, with their emphasis on discipleship. It is wrong to think that any single ministry can meet everyone's needs. We need to be careful about discrediting anyone's ministry (assuming it is biblical) simply because it is different. We need to learn from one another. I'm glad our pastoral staff are different from one another. We don't teach the same way, we don't always think alike on particular issues, but we need each other's perspective. That is why it is dangerous to follow one man exclusively, because no one believer has all the knowledge necessary to lead you to maturity. We need the variety of the gifts and ministries that Paul is describing here.

### 3. The purpose of our gifts is to benefit others

Notice Paul says we are given these manifestations of the Spirit "for the common good." They are not our possessions to do with as we please. They are not for showing off or comparing ourselves with others. On the contrary, they are for serving others. This is why Paul mentions love whenever he talks about spiritual gifts, because through the gifts God has given he supernaturally empowers us to love others. And we express our love in different ways. You may want to alleviate someone's pain, but I may want to exhort him to see God's perspective in the midst of pain. Both perspectives are right, and necessary.

### 4. The results of our gifts belong to God

C. S. Lewis once said, "You never can tell about God." And he was right. You never can tell what God is going to do next. On occasion I have spent time and energy on people whom I felt had significant gifts, and yet I have been shockingly disappointed by the results. It is because God is sovereign. He has the right to do what he pleases. It is our responsibility to be faithful and available, ready to impart what he has given to us, and dependent on the Spirit of God, and leave the results to God. He is the Lord who produces the results.

God wants every Christian to manifest his or her distinctive gifts in their local body. Because many don't, the rich variety of our Christian community is hidden, and our corporate life appears to outsiders as dull and conformist rather than rich and colorful.

Now Paul goes on to illustrate this rich diversity.

#### B. An illustration of diversity (12:8-11)

**For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. (12:8-11)**

The New Testament lists spiritual gifts in four different places. There are actually two lists in 1 Cor. 12, the second of which we will deal with next week. None of those lists are alike; they are all different. This leads me to conclude that Paul is not concerned here to give

an exhaustive list of gifts. This is merely representative of the diversity of the Spirit's manifestations, a sample of the kinds of things the Spirit of God can do. We can certainly see general categories of gifts, but there are combinations of gifts, with nuances and shades that are infinitely creative. Paul's concern here in 1 Cor. 12 is to offer a considerable list so that the Corinthians will stop being singular in their emphasis. This is not a systematic discussion of spiritual gifts, therefore. I am not sure Paul would recognize some of the arrangements and diagrams that some interpreters have brought to this text.

Let us look at each of the gifts briefly in an effort to gain some understanding of them. As the gift of tongues and prophecy are handled extensively in chapter 14, I will not talk about them here, since any comments I might make would be incomplete and possibly misleading.

#### The word of wisdom and the word of knowledge

Paul refers to these two gifts together. It is not clear exactly how they differ. Wisdom deals with the practical matters of the Christian life. It is skill in living, the capacity to apply truth in specific ways to life. With the added emphasis of the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge, Paul appears to be referring to revelatory gifts. People endowed with these gifts perhaps enjoyed a special experience in which a message came to them that they shared with others. Remember the early church did not always sit as we do in rows, listening to one person expound the scriptures. The New Testament was still incomplete at this point. As a matter of fact, 1 Corinthians was one of the first NT books to be written. A number of people would have been involved in first century church services. A prophet would speak, and by revelation give a word of wisdom, while another person would reveal a word of knowledge, a fact about God that had not already been revealed. The revelatory nature of these gifts is no longer needed, however, because we now have a completed NT. We find in this book the wisdom and knowledge to live life, and all of us can grow in these things as we understand and obey what we read here.

Solomon certainly possessed the gift of wisdom. Once, when he faced a situation where two women laid claim to the same baby, his particular words which brought the wisdom of God to the crisis were these: "Divide the living child in two, and give half to one, and half to the other." The identity of the true mother immediately became apparent because she would not allow this.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 illustrates how the Holy Spirit equipped Peter with a word of knowledge to deal with a circumstance which might never have been known, let alone dealt with, except by such a manifestation of the Spirit. The result of that gift being exercised was a renewed fear of the Lord in believers, and a number of unbelievers added to the church.

We don't need the revelatory nature of gifts in the Biblical sense of revelation anymore because we have a completed set of Scriptures which give us wisdom and knowledge. And we all have the ability to grow in wisdom and knowledge as we understand and obey God's truth. But we must also add that God is still in the business of communicating today. We ought to expect him to speak, sometimes in precise words, whatever he wants his church to know at any time.

#### Faith

It is probably best to describe what this gift is not before we say what it is. Clearly, it is neither the saving faith by which every Christian is enabled to receive the salvation of God, nor is it the faithful-

ness which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in our character. Nor is this referring to an optimist who thinks positively about everything. No, faith is not gullibility or optimism or easy-believism. Faith looks at God's character and stands firmly on God's promises. It can look past the immediacy of a situation to "Him who is invisible" and bring confidence that God will move in impossible situations.

The gallery of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 lends reality to this gift as it is displayed in the lives of men and women of God who through faith were assured of things they could neither see nor prove, and consequently pressed on with God through the most testing circumstances. There have always been examples of this kind of faith: George Mueller, Hudson Taylor, the Reformation martyrs, for example. And there are many in our own day who are not household names, people who display the same kind of faith and are a constant encouragement to us. This is why a regular reading diet of Christian biographies strengthens our growth in the Lord. I am privileged to know a woman who possesses this gift. She has been used by God to impart faith to others at crucial moments, such as decision-making times. There is an Eastern saying that well describes this gift: "Faith is the bird that knows the dawn, and sings while it is still dark."

### Gifts of healings

Both of those words are plural in the original. For this reason I don't think Paul is referring to a permanent "gift of healing" or a "healing ministry," but rather is suggesting that each occurrence is a gift in its own right. He is encouraging the Corinthians to expect to see many different ways in which God in his sheer grace brings healing of all kinds to different people, to relationships, even to circumstances. Jesus himself, the apostle Paul, and the members of the early church lived in regular expectation that God would heal people's physical bodies. That expectation came partly from the OT promises that in the Messianic age God would heal his people. According to Acts, such healings accompanied Paul's own ministry, and the apostle probably referred to them as one of the signs of an apostle (2 Cor 12:12). We ought to add that it was not and is not the Lord's will to bring physical healing in every situation. Physical healing is not ultimate wholeness. That comes through death for the believer (or through the return of Jesus in glory).

### The effecting of miracles

This gift refers to God's energy worked in powerful ways. Godet writes, "Paul has in view the power of working all sorts of miracles other than simple cures, corresponding to the wants of the different situations in which the servant of Christ may be placed: resurrections from the dead, the driving out of demons, judgments inflicted on unfaithful Christians, deliverances like that of Paul at Malta."

Here we encounter a gift that is truly beyond the ordinary. Jesus certainly possessed this gift. A similar ministry was carried by the apostles. In fact, Paul reminds the Corinthians in his second letter that the signs of an apostle "were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works." We can deduce from that that the major (though not exclusive) function of this gift was to authenticate the spoken word at a fresh stage of revelation in God's kingdom. This gift was evident in abundance at the giving of the Law, during the establishment of the prophets, during the incarnation, and at the apostolic preaching of the gospel.

### The distinguishing of spirits

This gift seems to refer to an ability to recognize the source of any purported spiritual manifestation. From the Scriptures we can identify three sources: the Holy Spirit, the human spirit, and an evil spirit. It is the Spirit who provides the gift of discernment as to which of these three spiritual sources is in operation in a particular situation. The highly complex nature of the human personality, especially in a disturbed state, demonstrates the extremes to which the human spirit can be taken. This discernment also shows how important it is for pastors and psychiatrists to work together in such cases.

Let me add that it is easy for someone who has been used in this discerning ministry to fall into the habit of seeing evil spirits in any unusual circumstance or behavior. Our Lord has provided balance for us in his own incisive, authoritative and quiet assurance. He saw the reality of demonic forces where we might not and his own contemporaries often did not. But he also discerned between sickness caused by demons and sickness caused by physiological factors.

The apostle's purpose in giving this list is to briefly illustrate the rich variety of gifts which the Spirit of God makes available to the church. The Spirit never imitates or contradicts himself. Only God can sustain such diversity in unity.

I will close with a story that practically illustrates what we have been learning.

Once upon a time, the animals decided they should do something meaningful to meet the problems of the new world. So they organized a school. They adopted an activity curriculum of running, climbing, swimming, and flying. To make it easier to administer the curriculum, all the animals took all the subjects. The duck was excellent in swimming; in fact, better than his instructor. But he made only passing grades in flying, and was very poor in running. Since he was slow in running, he had to drop swimming and stay after school to practice running. This caused his web feet to be badly worn, so that he was only average in swimming. But average was quite acceptable, so nobody worried about that—except the duck. The rabbit started at the top of his class in running, but developed a nervous twitch in his leg muscles because of so much make-up work in swimming. The squirrel was excellent in climbing, but he encountered constant frustration in flying class because his teacher made him start from the ground up instead of from the tree top down. He developed charlie horses from over exertion, and so only got a "C" in climbing and a "D" in running. The eagle was a problem child and was severely disciplined for being a non-conformist. In climbing classes he beat all the others to the top of the tree, but insisted on using his own way to get there.

What is true of creatures in the forest is true of Christians in the family. God did not make us all the same. He never intended to. He planned and designed our differences and our unique capabilities. He placed each of us in his family and gave us spiritual gifts. When we operate in the realm of those gifts we will excel, the whole body will benefit, and we will experience true satisfaction. If God has made you a duck saint, you're a duck. Swim like mad, but don't get discouraged because you wobble when you run or flap instead of fly.

© 1991 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino