

To God Alone Be The Glory

Gifted. That's what you are. Gifted. When I look at you I see a talent pool big enough to swim laps in. I'm not trying to puff you up like a marshmallow. We all know that your talents, your spiritual gifts, came from the Holy Spirit. You have the talents that our church needs you to have, the talents God wants you to have. CHRISTIAN, YOU ARE GIFTED!

But each of us is different from the rest, thanks to the Holy Spirit. As we discuss the spiritual gifts that the apostle Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 12, we first take note of the abilities that the Church on earth needs at all times and in all places.

The "message of wisdom" is one such gift. This is the ability that some Christians have for understanding how God's Word applies to various situations. The more you study the Bible, the more likely the Holy Spirit will increase in you this spiritual gift. Now let's say a person memorized the whole Bible but didn't really understand how the Bible relates to everyday life. Would such a person have this gift, the message of wisdom? No. But the Holy Spirit helps members understand the two main doctrines of the Bible, the law and the gospel. These believers are able to use this understanding, for instance, to help children and others navigate the difference between right and wrong. And they do this without setting aside God's will (antinomianism) or overemphasizing the law (legalism). Every church needs at least one member to have this spiritual gift. The more, the better.

The next spiritual gift Paul mentions is called "the message of knowledge." The person with this gift accumulates knowledge of God's Word through Bible study. What a

great gift to have! God wants his plan to save all people through Jesus' life and death to be communicated. The better you know the message, the more likely the Holy Spirit will enable you to speak the message of knowledge to someone else, maybe a friend or the children in your life. If it sounds like Paul is referring to the spiritual gift of teaching by another name, you may be right.

Faith is next. The spiritual gift of 'faith' is different from the saving faith in Jesus that every Christian has. This is a special measure of faith. Those who have this gift are able to trust God's promises during the most trying of circumstances. They have the ability to look past the difficulties of this life and maintain a cheerful trust in the Lord's promises. If you are familiar with the story of King David and the many psalms he wrote, you know that he had the spiritual gift of faith. People with this gift are the ones who speak up with comments like, "Let's trust the Lord. He's almighty and he's ruling all things on behalf of the church. He's going to see us through this challenge." People with this gift can help balance the church when attention is focused too much on numbers and dollars. The church needs both kinds of people because numbers and dollars matter for good management of God's church too. These spiritual gifts also come through Bible study. Hmm. Are we noticing a pattern?

The other spiritual gift on Paul's list which the church needs at all times and in all places is the gift of "distinguishing between spirits." "Spirits" is a Bible word that sometimes means "teachers of God's Word." For example, 1 John 4:1 says, "*Do not believe every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.*" The spiritual gift of "distinguishing between

spirits” is the ability to tell whether ‘a teacher who claims to be from God’ is teaching the truth or mixing in falsehoods. The measure, of course, is what the Bible actually says and not just what a person may think the Bible says. False prophets often appear to be godly and upright. That’s how some deceive so many people. What a special gift from God to be able to pick out the true teachers from the false, especially today when so many teachers, sad to say, have twisted God’s Word to suit the tastes of their listeners. This spiritual gift also comes from the Holy Spirit through Bible study. That’s four spiritual gifts on this list that come through Bible study. I wonder if that’s why your pastor keeps inviting you to stay for our Bible studies after worship. I wonder if that’s why your pastor keeps urging you to read the Bible every day. When you study the Bible, you become part of the solution instead of just part of the problem.

The gift of prophecy could be defined in two ways. On the one hand, a prophet in Bible times would get a message directly from God and then tell it to the people. Prophecy might be about the future, but more often prophecy was about the past or the present. Regardless of where any prophecy pointed, it was a message directly from God. If that’s what Paul means here, then prophecy is a gift God probably doesn’t give anymore. He could, but there doesn’t appear to be much need for direct prophecy anymore because we have the Word of God written down for us in the Bible. Everything we need to know for eternal life is right here in the Bible. If God ever deems it necessary to give this gift again in special circumstances or for a particular time, then glory be to God. But let’s not look for further prophecy unless we’ve mastered the Bible, because any new prophecy God may send will have to agree with the rest of

the prophecies God already sent. God’s messages always agree with each other.

On the other hand, when Paul mentions ‘prophecy’ he could be referring to the spiritual gift of ‘proclaiming God’s Word to God’s people.’ If so, then this gift is very much alive in the church today. Every time you open your mouth and speak part of God’s message to anyone else, be it a child, grandchild, co-worker, school chum, friend, or neighbor, then you are prophesying. The more of God’s Word you pour into your heart, the more will flow out of your mouth. *“For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks”* (Matthew 12:34).

The other gifts in this list are different from those that we’ve discussed so far. The gift of healing is, in all likelihood, a gift that the Holy Spirit gave for just a while in the early church. If the Holy Spirit wanted to, he could give believers today this ability to heal the sick and the dying. In the early church God enabled some people to heal as a kind of testimony to others: “Hey, these healers have My approval. Listen when they speak My message.” Certainly the healings were done out of compassion for the sick, but you have to admit, it’s easier to listen to someone who has just healed you or your loved one. Remember that in Corinth, God’s message of ‘complete forgiveness for all sin through the sacrifice of God’s Son Jesus’ was considered foolishness. Healings then were intended to get people’s attention so they would listen to God’s message of foolishness and become *“wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus”* (2 Timothy 3:15).

“Miraculous powers” is the next gift. It’s a lot like “healing” but much broader. God gave to some people in Bible times the ability to exert power in a special way. The Old

Testament prophet Elisha had this gift. When an axe head came off its handle and sank into a pond, Elisha told a helper to throw a certain piece of wood into the water, and the axe head was made to float (2 Kings 6). In the early church God allowed some Christians to have miraculous powers so that skeptics would listen to the message. He wanted to save everyone through the message. That's what all these spiritual gifts are about.

Today a lot of people like to make a big deal out of 'tongue speaking.' But notice where Paul puts this spiritual gift, along with 'the interpretation of tongues': last on the list. This doesn't mean that tongue speaking is less important. The same Holy Spirit gave some early Christians the gift of speaking in languages that they had never studied and couldn't have known on their own. What a great gift for spreading the gospel! But in Corinth the people were over emphasizing tongue speaking. This may be why Paul lists it last. In lots of churches today people allow their attention to be drawn away from the message of forgiveness in Jesus to the gift of tongue speaking itself. It's as if they've forgotten that the Holy Spirit gave this gift to authenticate the Christian message. It's supposed to be about the message. Tongue speaking is one reason why the gospel message spread so rapidly in the first century: the language barrier was not a barrier for anyone who could explain God's message in other languages. Today our missionaries have to spend years learning a foreign language before they can share the gospel in that tongue. The overemphasis on tongue-speaking and interpreting tongues divides Christians today. In the early church the interpretation of tongues was a gift that God gave to some so that any message spoken during worship in a foreign language could be translated right away. This way everyone else

in that church could be edified, thus melting away ethnic differences and causing Christian unity. God wants unity in the church. Tongue speaking caused unity back then.

The Bible has about a half dozen lists of spiritual gifts, and each list is a little different from the others. This suggests that God may give spiritual gifts which are not listed in the Bible. The Holy Spirit may give new gifts as circumstances change. Take Builders for Christ as an example. This is a group of WELS people who travel to various places in the country where our mission churches are building new worship facilities. They volunteer their time and skills so that our little mission congregations don't have to go so far into debt to build a church. Now I suppose the spiritual gifts these people exhibit could fall under the category of gifts called "service." But we could just as easily identify the spiritual gift as "building." The same thing could be said of those who use their technology skills to get worship videos out to people at home, or those who design beautiful layouts for the screen or the website. The point is that the Holy Spirit gives a great many spiritual gifts, tailoring them to the needs of a church at any given time so that church members are able to coordinate efforts and accomplish the task of proclaiming the gospel. It's always about the message of Christ. Some of the gifts the Holy Spirit gave the Corinthians, he has chosen not to give us. The Spirit knows the needs of each church, and he is constantly doing something about it. He always gives the spiritual gifts that each church needs.

We're discussing spiritual gifts because we have members who want to help our church do a better job of fulfilling our purpose as a church. The more of us who take on the attitude: "I am a member of this church, and I want to be a part of our following God's plan," the more we each will take on a task that fits

our spiritual gifts. It's one way we express our joy in Jesus our Savior. Whether you have lots of time or only a little, plug yourself and the spiritual gifts God gave you into the ministry here, because ⁷*"to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good."* God gave you abilities so you could benefit others.

Sometimes 'not right now' is the right answer. I say this because people can feel so guilty about not helping that they stop attending worship. This hurts rather than helping. So how do you know when it's right to say, "I'm too busy," and when it's wrong? Here's how to tell. If you want to serve but truly can't or shouldn't, you'll probably keep wanting to help, even after you say, 'not right now, give me a few weeks/months/years' or 'I honestly can't do that anymore.' If you want to help but can't or shouldn't, don't feel guilty. Your heart is in the right place, and in a few moments I'll point out a huge way you can still be involved. If I believe you should not be helping with our ministry because of how the Lord has arranged your life, I will urge you not to help. Let's talk it out. On the other hand, if you're really glad you found a way not to help, then your 'no' is not from God. It's your sinful flesh finding yet another way to be selfish. This indicates that it's time to out your flesh to the Lord, to know with certainty that you're forgiven for Jesus' sake, and to look for a way to plug in.

Here's something else that can be helpful. You might have a spiritual gift you don't know about yet. Don't be afraid to try new ways to serve. You may figure out by trying that you don't have a particular spiritual gift: it's okay to say so. Don't feel guilty. Your lack of a particular gift is on the Holy Spirit, not on you. Praise him for what you can do. Try something else. Sooner or later, probably

sooner, you'll find just the right fit. After serving one way a long while, you may decide to try something else. Great! Maybe the Holy Spirit has made you multi-talented—in fact, probably so.

Here's yet another thing that can be helpful. If you're limited to a couple hours per month or one day per year that you can help, that's okay. It's better to move a project forward a little and then let it sit till you can come back to it than just to let it sit. We need to cut each other some slack if we're going to work together.

"But what if I fail?" What if you don't? God plans to help you with your task. "But what if someone criticizes me?" Embrace the criticism humbly. It's an opportunity to do better, or to show someone how to criticize in a way that actually builds up rather than tears down. There is a way to criticize that actually helps and blesses.

If all you can do is pray for the spread of the gospel, please know how valuable your prayers are to our teachers and all our volunteers. God is pleased to hear from you for the sake of Jesus. I can often tell when someone has been praying for me. Many times I have been up against some huge challenge, and all of a sudden, things fell into place. Later on, someone told me they were praying for me at the very time that chaos collapsed into order. Those who benefit from your prayers thank God for you.

So you see, dear CHRISTIAN, YOU ARE GIFTED! *"All these [spiritual gifts] are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines."* Let's use our gifts for Jesus and for each other. Glory be to God!