



THE HOLY SPIRIT PART IV: UNWRAPPING SPIRITUAL GIFTS

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It seems hard to believe that we're already on our fourth Sunday of talking about the Holy Spirit. I hope this series has been helpful to your thinking about the Spirit. We've looked at his identity and the evidences of his life in us in what we call the fruit of the Spirit. Last week we talked about the way he speaks to us in those soft whispers and how we can either listen or tune him out.

This morning we're going to zero in on what are called, "Spiritual Gifts." If you're fairly new in your faith, that may not be a term you've heard of, and if you've been a Christian a long time, chances are it's still a somewhat fuzzy concept.

The Bible tells us that when we put our faith in Christ, we receive the Holy Spirit, which is a gift in itself. But when he moves in, he doesn't come empty-handed. He gives each of us a special gift.

Like so many concepts we've discussed about the Holy Spirit, there's a lot of confusion out there about what spiritual gifts are and how they should fit in our lives. Fortunately, that's really nothing new. Paul found he had to instruct churches about spiritual gifts way back in the first century as well. He talks about them in different places in the Bible, but it's his letter to the church in Corinth that gives us some of the best foundational material.

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues,

and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

Do you remember waiting for Christmas as a kid? My parents used to put presents under the tree for what seemed like WEEKS ahead of time, but it was probably only a couple days. I was pretty good about not peeking, but I would squeeze them, turn them over, shake them and size them up to try to guess what was inside. I was in the dark until the time came to finally open them. And they weren't any good to play with until I could get them out of the packaging.

If you took an informal survey, you'd find that most Christians are in the dark when it comes to their spiritual gifts. They might have a few guesses about their gifts, but they haven't unwrapped them. And if they're not unwrapped, they're not all that usable.

Paul said he did not want us to be ignorant, to be without knowledge about spiritual gifts. So what can we learn from this passage?

What do we know about spiritual gifts?

Separation

One of the first things Paul tells us about spiritual gifts is that there are different ones.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit.

What are all the different gifts? Paul lists out a few of them. When you combine that list with other lists of spiritual gifts in the Bible, you get a pretty diverse spread:

Prophecy – conveying messages from God

Preaching – proclaiming the good news of Jesus and the cross

Teaching – instructing people in how to live the Christian life

Wisdom – knowing what is the right course of action in difficult circumstances

Discernment – sensing what's happening on a spiritual dimension

Knowledge – learning something from God that you'd have no way of knowing

Faith – believing God will work in a situation despite how it looks

Evangelism – sharing your faith in a way that people respond to

Healing – praying for people and seeing them cured

Mercy – having compassion on people

Generosity – giving above and beyond, financially or otherwise

Hospitality – opening up your heart and home to welcome people

Leadership – envisioning the direction for the future

Administration – planning and organizing to make things happen

Service – doing the behind the scenes work to help

Encouragement – lifting people's spirits and confidence

Tongues – an ability to speak in languages you haven't learned (human OR angelic). If you've never heard it happen before, what typically happens is during a prayer time,

someone stands up and begins praying in words that you can't understand. Then someone with the gift of interpretation will stand up and explain what they just said. Usually it is an encouragement for the group that might even be directly from a passage of Scripture.

We'll talk about those last two later, since they seem to always generate a lot of curiosity and debate. As you can see, that's a pretty long list, and I didn't even include all of them. The fact that no two lists are exactly the same would suggest that Paul was never trying to give a definitive number of gifts, but was pointing out that there is a huge amount of diversity.

When we talked about the fruit of the Spirit, we said that it wasn't a buffet line where we only take what we want. We couldn't pick and choose between love and joy and faithfulness, because they were all character qualities that should show up in each one of us. It was a whole package.

The same can not be said of spiritual gifts. In fact, Scripture seems to point out regularly that nobody has all the gifts.

Romans 12:4-6

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.

Each individual Christian has their own gift or gifts. Mine aren't the same as yours, and yours aren't the same as someone else's. Every Christian has at least one main gift, and often times several. But no one has them all.

The fruits of the Spirit highlight the completeness of the transformation in our lives and how pervasive it is in every aspect of who we are. But the gifts of the Spirit highlight our dependence on other Christians. We are not complete by ourselves.

One of my favorite painters is George Seurat – the French impressionist painter who created this picture. I had the chance to see the painting in Chicago, where it hangs in the Art Institute, and it is breathtaking. I think I've mentioned before how he invented a totally new way of painting. Instead of mixing colors on the palette, he painted with just 11 different colors and would put dots of two different colors side by side. When someone looks at the painting, though, their eyes merge the two colors to create a new one. The individual colors work side by side together to produce something you wouldn't get with just a solid color. It actually is the same theory behind modern printing today. When you look at a picture in a book or magazine under a magnifying glass, you'll see tiny dots of different colors.

God is painting a picture with us for the world. We are a picture of Christ. But none of us individually show the whole picture. We need to be side by side with other Christians

who have different gifts, because the world looks at us together in order to see what God wants them to see.

Do you know how liberating it is to know we don't have to be exactly like each other? One of the biggest traps in church is that we hold up people who seem particularly successful in their faith, maybe we read their books or listen to them speak, and then we start to think about how we can follow the same path they did.

For all of you who were band geeks like me in school, you'll relate to this analogy. The music handed out to the flute section is different than the music handed to the trombones or the clarinets. It's all the same song – but different notes. Not only that, even within each section, you have first chair, second chair and so on, who play different parts. You don't want everybody doing exactly the same thing, or making the same sound. That would be boring. You need all the different instruments playing all the different notes to achieve what the composer intended.

God hands out different music for everyone in his band. Not everyone's supposed to act the same. We should all be playing from the same page of music, so to speak, but there's a whole lot of freedom in what it will sound like for each of us. We only have to be what God has made us to be.

Let me tell you, it's becoming clearer and clearer to me all the time what gifts I don't have. I don't have the gift of administration, which Paul talks about later in the chapter. And there's a whole lot of administration attached to starting up a church. When I have to do those things, I find them incredibly draining and frustrating. But I've discovered there are people in this group who have that gift, and they love that aspect of ministry. When I hand things off to them, they get done easily and efficiently.

I don't have the gift of hospitality, either. If you stop by the house to see me, you'll be lucky to get a glass of warm water, and that's only if you ask for it. I just don't even think in terms of making people comfortable. Fortunately Karin DOES. She doesn't really consider hospitality her main thing, but she's much more gifted in that than I am. She not only puts on a good spread, she sends people home with whatever is left over. She goes out of her way to be welcoming, and it makes an incredible difference in the way people experience our home. And our homes are an important part of church life.

Even though it's liberating to not have all the gifts, it also is nearly universal that we aren't always satisfied. We look at other gifts we wish we had, and in the process don't use what we've been given. Martin Luther said this: “Nothing is likely to cause so much division as when people do not stay within the proper bounds of their calling, but neglect their own ministry and break in upon others. God does not give to every person all gifts...”

That's why Paul said this to the Romans:

Romans 12:6-8

If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

The gifts are separate and distinct from each other. Nobody has them all, and once we do know where we're gifted, we should focus on that area and not look at what we'd rather do and waste the gift we HAVE been given. And we should let the people who are gifted in that area do what they're best equipped to do, without us interfering and sharing our two cents when we really don't know what we're talking about.

Karin was talking with a friend this week who goes to another church, and this friend shared that she had been very critical one of her pastor's recent staffing decisions, until it hit her that he knew far more about what was needed in that area than she did. She needed to trust his leadership gifts and not question his methods unless she had something to offer.

The second truth Paul points out to us is the source of the gifts.

Source

There are different kinds of gifts , but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.

Do you notice how Paul wove in a reference to the Trinity there? The same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is the source of our gifts.

That's probably obvious since we're calling these spiritual gifts. They must come from the Spirit. But I think there are some good reasons why Paul would want to emphasize that point in his instructions.

The fact that the Spirit is the source of these gifts means they can be given however he chooses to give them.

We mentioned the gift of tongues earlier, and it's a good example of this point. When I was very young, my dad was teaching an adult Sunday School class on spiritual gifts, and when he mentioned that speaking in tongues was still possible as far as the Bible was concerned, he was asked to stop teaching. That church had decided that particular gift was no longer valid and was only for Bible times.

When I was fresh out of college, Karin and I attended a church for a time where it was expected that everyone would at some point speak in tongues. Their belief was that since that's what everyone did when the Holy Spirit came to the disciples at Pentecost, that's what he does every time today.

Two opposite opinions that both reflect the same kind of error in thinking about spiritual gifts. Because when we take a position like either of those, we are telling the Spirit how he has to operate, and that just won't fly. He's the source, and he gets to decide.

1 Corinthians 12:11

All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

Have you ever gone to buy someone a wedding gift where they've "registered?" Hopefully they registered at Target and not just Macy's. How would you feel if they assigned you one particular gift and said, "You have to buy me this place setting or I won't accept it." Paul says we can desire and pray for certain gifts if we want, but in the end, the Spirit will give what he wants, and we need to be grateful for the fact that he gives us gifts at all.

Second, if the Spirit is the source, they are his – not ours.

One of my favorite quotes was from a speaker named John Barbour, who I once heard say, "God gave you your gifts. He's not impressed by them."

The danger in discovering what our spiritual gifts are is that we will somehow turn them into a source of pride, even though we had nothing to do with how we got them or why the Holy Spirit chose to give them to us.

When Paul was talking to the Ephesians about grace, he said it was a gift of God and not by works, so that nobody could boast. The same could be said of spiritual gifts – there's no grounds for pride when we're not the source.

When we forget that, we're in trouble, because our good and perfect gifts are housed in less than perfect bodies and minds. Gifts can take on an ugly edge. If I have the gift of administration and think it's just mine, I can want to control everything. If I have the gift of discernment and forget the source, I may start to believe I'm always right and my judgment shouldn't be questioned. If I have the gift of service I might work myself into the ground thinking that's why people like me.

But the gifts aren't ours – they're the Holy Spirit's. And that affects how we use them.

A third reason why it matters that the Holy Spirit is the source is because it means the gifts are not an end in themselves.

Let's say I had the gift of healing (which I don't). That would be a pretty cool one to have, I think. There's a lot of power in that gift that could become a real center of attention. I could forget about where it came from and just focus on using it all the time to make the world a better place.

But the gifts are not independent entities. Paul calls them “manifestations” of the Spirit. They’re symptoms of the Spirit being in our lives. They are there as pointers to him. If we turn them into something else, then it is changing their character, and he can just as easily take the gift away as he can give it.

This leads us right into my final point. Paul has shown us how the gifts are separate, how they have a source, and also what they have in terms of significance.

Significance

There’s a reason we’ve been given spiritual gifts. They are not just random acts of kindness the Spirit decided to do. He had a purpose.

Back in the Old Testament, when the Israelites were out in the desert, they were getting ready to construct the Tabernacle, and that required certain expertise.

Exodus 35:30-35

Then Moses said to the Israelites, “See, the LORD has chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts — to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic craftsmanship. And he has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others. He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as craftsmen, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers — all of them master craftsmen and designers.”

That’s a picture of what’s going on today. God fills his people with his Spirit and gives them gifts and skills to help build up his sanctuary – his church.

Ephesians 4:11-13

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Spiritual gifts aren’t given for our own enjoyment or to create our own little centers of power. They’re given for one purpose, and that’s to build the church.

People might ask “Where does New Day stand on the gift of tongues?” I just point to what Paul told people, “Look – I know you’re fascinated by the idea of speaking in tongues, but really, it’s the least important gift, because unless somebody interprets it, it doesn’t do any good for the rest of the group. And if people with no church background come in, what will they think if they hear somebody babbling?” So Paul encouraged people with the gift of tongues to use it in prayer at home rather than in church. I think that’s pretty good advice, particularly for our church that is intended to be a place where

people with no church background can feel comfortable. The Spirit will give us gifts that are best suited to building up that kind of church.

God does something wonderful in this combination of giving us a special measure of his grace in one area, while leaving us lacking in others. It doesn't leave us feeling like we don't matter, but at the same time it prevents us from thinking we're complete on our own.

1 Corinthians 12:21-26

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

The church needs preachers to keep us grounded in the truth of Christ. The church needs teachers because we're always one generation away from extinction if what we know isn't passed on. The church needs people with the gift of mercy, because without them we'd be a cold, harsh dose of holiness. The church needs people who have the gift of faith to keep the rest of us believing through the hard times. The church needs people with discernment so we don't head down the wrong path. The church needs people with the gift of hospitality or nobody would ever come back. The church needs people with the gift of encouragement to give us strength to keep going. The list goes on and on and on. Each person has something to contribute that is vital to the life of the whole group.

And that raises the very practical question: How do I know what my gift is? Maybe you don't feel like you have much to offer, or you're willing to do whatever but don't feel like you have a "specialty." What are you supposed to do?

Rather than just talk about it, I want to do something like we did last week and have a living example we can look at. I've asked Roxy Clum if she'd be kind enough to share a bit about her gift and explore with us how she came to discover it.

What do you consider your primary spiritual gift?

Do you remember when you discovered it?

How did you know that was your gift?

How has it been confirmed in your life?

Have you ever tried something that was not your gift?

How does it feel when you're using your gift?

What would you say to someone who wanted to know how to find their gift?

Some suggestions for discovering your gift:

1. Pray about it. As we said last week, the Holy Spirit still speaks, and if you ask him, he can give you a sense of direction as to what areas your gifting might be in. That could be through a growing interest in an area as he gives you a heart for a certain type of ministry.
2. Talk to other Christians about you. Most of the time, other people can see our gifts more clearly than we can. They can confirm what you already know, or tell you about things they see that you never knew.
3. Try something. If you jump into a ministry, you'll know pretty quickly whether or not it's a good fit. Something may sound like a good idea, and then you try it and find it's nothing like what you thought. Or, you could find that it's a passion you never knew you had.
4. Watch for results. When you pray with and for sick people, are they getting well? Do people gravitate to you for encouragement? Do people appreciate your teaching? You should be able to see things happening if it truly is where you're gifted.

If you're wanting to discuss this in more depth to find your gift, I'd love to talk with you personally and point you to additional resources. If there's enough interest, we may even pull together a small group to study the issue.

Closing Questions:

Do I know my gift or gifts? If not, what steps can I take to discover them?

What role can I play in what Christ is doing to build his church?