

Sermon 19 January 2025: 2nd of Epiphany

1 Corinthians 12: 1-11 NLT

Now, dear brothers and sisters, regarding your question about the special abilities the Spirit gives us. I don't want you to misunderstand this. You know that when you were still pagans, you were led astray and swept along in worshiping speechless idols. So I want you to know that no one speaking by the Spirit of God will curse Jesus, and no one can say Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit.

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same Lord. God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us.

A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other. To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice; to another the same Spirit gives a message of special knowledge. The same Spirit gives great faith to another, and to someone else the one Spirit gives the gift of healing. He gives one person the power to perform miracles, and another the ability to prophesy. He gives someone else the ability to discern whether a message is from the Spirit of God or from another spirit. Still another person is given the ability to speak in unknown languages, while another is given the ability to interpret what is being said. It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have.

Introduction

Prayer

Gifts are great things to receive – yes? Then why is it that so often at Christmas time they leave people unhappy? Children can be greedy, easily disappointed, envious of siblings, unappreciative. Adults are often no better.

Spiritual gifts are designed to be good for the church. The Corinthian Church had plenty of them, but they had lost their way. Their gifts had given rise to prideful competition, disorderly meetings and confusion of all sorts. Instead of uniting and strengthening the church, misuse of the gifts had led to division.

Paul spends three chapters of his first letter to the Corinthians discussing spiritual gifts. The centrepiece of this discourse is 1 Corinthians 13, his beautiful poem about Christian Love – the greatest and most enduring of all spiritual gifts. He says all the others are worthless and empty if there is no love. He has nothing bad to say about these gifts, and indeed encourages his readers to eagerly desire spiritual gifts – but the context must always be the way of love, and everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

Our passage today is Paul's introduction to his teaching about the spiritual gifts. While he gives a list of nine gifts here, he mentions several others elsewhere. He has three overarching themes in these eleven verses:

1. The main focus is not the gifts, but God, the Giver
2. Since the One Spirit is the source of the gifts, they should unite, never divide
3. The purpose of the gifts is for the common good not personal benefit.

1. The main focus is not Spiritual Gifts but God, the giver.

In the NLT version that Deidre read to us, The Holy Spirit is mentioned by name ten times, and by the pronoun *he* a further three times. When we add in Jesus and God the total comes to at least 17 references to members of the Trinity in just 11 verses. There's no doubt as to who is at the centre. In verses four and five we read:

*There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same **Spirit** is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same **Lord. God** works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us.*

The main focus of this passage is not spiritual gifts, but God, the Giver and in particular the Holy Spirit, whose special job it is to distribute and breathe life into these gifts.

Sadly gifts can be the cause of enmity. Pridefully thinking that I am somehow special because of the gifts I have. Envyng you for what you have. Despising others because their gift seems to be less glittery, or non-existent.

When we think like this about spiritual gifts, we have completely missed the point that these are GIFTS. We know in our heads, though perhaps not always in our hearts, that gifts:

- Are undeserved – we don't earn them or pay for them
- Ideally have been chosen carefully as being suitable and appropriate for the recipient
- Have their true worth in the love and thoughtfulness in which they were given, and the joy they bring, not in their market value
- Should be appreciated, cherished and put to use with joy

A gift should never give rise to disappointment, pride or envy.

But in the Corinthian church it seems that the gifts of the Spirit had led to hierarchies and disunity. And that leads us to our next overarching theme.

2. The One Spirit is the source of the gifts

Paul emphasizes, again and again, that all the gifts come from the One Holy Spirit:

*To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice; to another the **same Spirit** gives a message of special knowledge. The **same Spirit** gives great faith to another, and to someone else the **one Spirit** gives the gift of healing ... and so on through his list of nine gifts. Each is given by the same Holy Spirit.*

Unity amongst the church family is extremely important to Paul. To combat the divisions in the Corinthian church he says

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all

In South India you can visit the Brindavan Gardens, near Mysore. These beautiful gardens are below a huge dam across the great Kaveri river. The lake created by the dam provides all the water needed for the gardens. The most elaborate feature is the “dancing fountain” which provides an amazing display of shooting jets of water synchronized to music and coloured spot lighting. There are probably at least a hundred different fountains there, as well as numerous other waterfalls, streams and other water features spread across the gardens. These may all look and behave differently, but the source of the water is the same. So it is with the gifts of the Spirit – they may look different, but the source is the same.

Before listing the gifts, Paul says:

I want you to know that no one speaking by the Spirit of God will curse Jesus, and no one can say Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit.

Only the Holy Spirit can enable someone to truly say and trust and live out the conviction that *Jesus is Lord*. Not only is it an expression of the Headship of Christ over everything, it is also a personal affirmation, a submission of our entire lives to his authority and rule.

Fundamental unity comes from saying, believing and living out that phrase **Jesus is Lord**.

3. The Purpose of the gifts is for the common good

Often gifts are just for the pleasure and benefit of the recipient. But *spiritual* gifts are meant to be a blessing for others, not just for us.

Some years ago my wife, Debbie, gave me for my birthday an electronic version of Bishop Tom Wright’s *New Testament for Everyone*: an omnibus collection of his “*For Everyone*” series of commentaries on New Testament books. She knows that I read and study the Bible a lot, so it was a well-chosen gift. But it wasn’t just a gift for me to treasure for myself. You may have noticed that many of my sermons contain a quote or comment from Tom Wright. It was a gift to help me in teaching and preaching, and so it hopefully benefits others also.

Paul says

A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other. [or for the common good.]

Later in these three chapters on spiritual gifts Paul says that a prophet’s work is to strengthen, encourage and comfort others. The other gifts have a similar role in helping others to grow in faith and fruitfulness.

So the spiritual gifts are given for the good of others, not for our own benefit. They should be used to build up the Church, never to hurt, abuse or harm others. That is why love must always be the underlying and controlling ingredient.

Paul says *A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other*. In other words, every Christian receives spiritual gifts. These gifts have a purpose, they are not just ornaments, or for selfish fun.

It's great to know that we all have spiritual gifts, but – if they have been given for a purpose, then we must use them for that purpose. God may have given you a gift that when you pray for people they often recover unexpectedly. That may be the gift of healing. What a wonderful gift to have. However if you are shy, and never exercise that gift then the church will be the poorer for it. So we should all seek to exercise our gifts for the benefit of those around us.

Conclusion

We have learned that

1. The main focus must be on God, the Giver, not on the gifts or anyone else.
2. Since the One Spirit is the source of the gifts, they should unite, never divide
3. The purpose of the gifts is for the common good not personal benefit.

The last verse of our passage says that *The Spirit determines which gifts to give each of us*. He is in control, and he knows what he is doing.

- Everyone has spiritual gifting, including you.
- Each gift is given for a purpose, and is meant to build up the church: we should use our gifts, not hide them
- No room for pride in our gifts
- No room either to hide our gifts or refuse to bring them out to be used for the benefit of others.

So let us thank God for the gifts he so freely gives us. We may need his help in working out what gifts we have, and how best we can use them. And others can help us to do that. But once we have identified them, let's use them in the way of love for the good of the church.

Closing Prayer