

St. Paul: Saturday Session Sixteen: Gifts of the Spirit

Applications of Paul's Message: Spirit's Gifts

Overview: Christ's Revelation of the Spirit

Jesus is Revelation in the Flesh, so everything begins with Jesus. He came to us through the Holy Spirit, as the accounts of His infancy show: Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:15; Luke 1:35. This Holy Spirit descended visibly upon him when John baptized him, Luke 3:22. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to us all: ***If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?*** Luke 11:13 (American Standard Version) St. John the Baptist proposed that Jesus would surpass him precisely by exceeding the baptism of water by the Spirit: ***I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*** Mark 1:8. In His most intimate interaction with us, at the Last Supper, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit: ***But now I am going to Him who sent Me; and none of you asks Me, 'Where are You going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.*** John 16:5-11 Jesus sends His Spirit, the third Person of the Blessed Trinity, to be our Helper, the Soul of each and every one who believes in Christ, the Heart of the Church.

The Holy Spirit spectacularly descended upon the apostles at Pentecost. ***When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.*** Acts 2:1-4

The Spirit strengthened the frightened Apostles, inspiring them to speak with confidence, Acts 2: 5-7. As the Spirit moved them, all different languages flowed, and each listener heard the Word in his own language, Acts 2: 8-11. To bolster the Apostles, the Spirit chose Paul: ***While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them".*** Acts 13:2 Enlivened by the Spirit, Paul strove to share the Spirit's work in him with all Christ's followers. All the Apostles shared the Spirit, but Paul spoke the Spirit most explicitly. He explained the Spirit's gifts, poured out so abundantly upon Paul himself, and upon all who accepted Christ, now more alive in the Spirit than before in the flesh. Let us hear Paul as he expounds the gifts.

St. Paul: the Spirit's Gifts

In the **Jerusalem Biblical Commentary**, 49:59-64, we learn that Paul responded to controversy in Corinth by putting the Spirit's gifts in order of importance. Paul's first-hand experience showed him which gifts were most important. They were not the ones emphasized in Corinth, where ego-tripping tripped the people up, and split the church, 1 Cor 12:1-3. Corinthians used the "feel-good" standard to judge the gifts. If they thrill me, they're great. Paul reminded them that Jesus is Lord, not thrill. Since all gifts have the same source, they have the same purpose, which is to serve God. But God is invisible and intangible, so the gifts' purpose is to serve the church. Is one person gifted, and is he puffed up with pride?

Then Paul reminds them: ***Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.*** 1 Corinthians 6:19-20. All credit goes to God, because the Holy Spirit grants these gifts. The remedy for pride is to give credit where it's due: to the Holy Spirit. If anyone feels good about the Spirit's gift, give glory to God. If not, give glory to God. Feelings are not the point. The gifts are the point, ultimately for serving the community.

It was hard for Corinthians to overcome feeling good, because their pagan life was all about gushing over this or that stimulus. Ecstatic feelings were the whole point of pagan superstitions. But Corinthians, baptized into the new life of Christ, now live for higher goals. Along the way to these goals, enjoyment is greater than anything they could whomp-up before. This should teach them that feelings are fringe-benefits of achievement. Christ-life is more thrilling than their former excitements. Because the community split over feelings, Paul tried to get them beyond emotions, into more stable grace-life. In full life, emotions flow freely because we do not try to capture them, to extend their warm, fuzzy, fun. On the negative side, complete life refuses to prevent feelings' cold, piercing pain. Paul tries to focus them on Christ instead.

The basic struggle was between Corinthians who sought sensations and those who sought to serve. Incidentally, Paul lists different gifts in Romans 12:6-8, 1 Cor 12:5-11; 27-30, and Eph 4:11. It helps to remember that the Spirit can't be confined, and does not have a limiting list of gifts. Whatever we list is a fine start, but not the end of what the Spirit can do. Paul was helping Corinthians deal with larger issues than a gift-list. Paul says it best: ***Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion***

of his faith if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. Romans 12:6-8

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 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. 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. 1 Cor 12:5-11 This is the most complete list that Paul provides. Notice that he emphasizes that all gifts are for the common good.

And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. 1 Corinthians 12:28 Notice how Paul combats wild feelings of superiority for the minor gifts. He lists apostles first, then prophets, then teachers. But consider what it would be like to speak in tongues through Spirit-gift. Authority, prophecy, teaching and healing miracles seem insignificant compared to the tongues that I just spoke. These other gifts occur only occasionally, but speech can go on. If I had just spoken in a foreign tongue, I would be so full of myself that I could overlook other gifts. My ego-trip would erase everything else, and exalt my personal achievement over all. This is the personal problem Paul tried to solve, as Jerome Biblical Commentary 63 notes. He wanted the gifted person to acknowledge where the gift came from. Instead Corinthians were prideful. This deviation from Christ-life split the community. Hans Urs von Balthazar emphasizes several conflicts in *Paul Struggles with His Congregation: The Pastoral Message of the Letters to the Corinthians*. Naturally, we will not dwell upon this split, but we take warning from the temptation to pride, lest we claim for ourselves what the Spirit gives to us.

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ. Ephesians 4:11 Here Paul emphasizes the foundation for gifts: all for the work of service, for building up the body of Christ. This is the goal worth getting. Every time the Spirit provides gifts, it's to build up Christ-life. Paul hammered that point home. *All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way.* 1 Corinthians 12:29-31

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. 1 Cor 13:1-3 This more excellent way is love. All gifts are for love, so that we can first accept Love, then love our neighbors all the way to Love Himself. This is how to cherish Spirit-gifts. All is for God, Who is Love. In this context, we can see why the number of gifts varies. Love is most important, and the Spirit, Who is Love, gives us what we need the most. In that context, the gifts are not rigidly numbered.

Therefore, we isolate seven gifts from Paul's various lists. Over the centuries, our prayerful thinkers, called theologians, have distinguished the virtue of faith from Spirit-gifts, so it does not appear after the third century. Nor do we include tongues and interpretation. In the enthusiasm of the early days, these gifts were quite important. By them, many people noticed the truth of Christianity, and followed the Way. But as people settled into Christ-life, morality improved remarkably, and daily virtue became more important. Therefore, the Church proposes seven rather different gifts. Why? As St. Thomas Aquinas shows, we use our minds (intellects) to understand the next step to take toward God, and our wills to choose that step. So wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and counsel help us know what to do, while fortitude, piety and fear of the Lord help us do it. These practical gifts are less exciting than the ones Paul mentions. But they fit better into a Christianized society. Their number is also symbolic of or doing all that we need to do, covering the ground, as seven is the sacred number for an adequate amount. Theologians applied Spirit-gifts to daily life in a Christian world.

The first gift of **wisdom** requires God's assistance to look beyond details that confuse us, so that we can see the fullness of God's plan. By wisdom, we see the whole, wholly. Humans can't do that without divine assistance. You notice that Paul uses wisdom, but doesn't use these explanatory words. Instead, he shows this gift in his own actions, and promises it to his followers. **Understanding** gets us from the holistic view down to patterns of world events. Paul navigates from the complete picture into these patterns, and wants all Christians to do the same. **Knowledge** goes all the way down to details, as Paul himself did throughout his career. **Counsel** enables us to check with God for specific enlightenment, and to work with others about obscure items we don't need to know for daily operations. All these mind-expanding activities are simple human virtues, but no not go far enough. So Spirit-gifts perfect these ways to learn.

As the many martyrs of the first centuries showed, Spirit-inspired choices distinguished Christian life from all others. Without divine support, **fortitude** would fail, so it's one of the more important gifts, strengthening us to do God's will in all things. **Piety** enables us to worship God beyond the usual human limits. **Fear of the Lord** is awe and wonder at God's infinity, especially His infinite Love. It's the opposite of servile fear of evil, because it's loving union with God.