

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

Applications of Paul's Message: Spirit's Gifts

Paul's Use of the Spirit's Gifts

Because Paul lists several gifts, we will quote again the lists he gives, all from the New American Standard version. *Since we have gifts that differ...: 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 *For to one is given the word of wisdom ... to another the word of knowledge...; to another faith ..., and to another gifts of healing ..., 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 12:8-11 *God appointed in the church, first apostles, 2nd prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.* 1 Corinthians 12:28

Let's take them in that order, skipping repetitions and virtues. They are: prophecy, teaching, exhortation, wisdom, knowledge, healing, miracles, distinguishing spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues, and administration. Faith is indeed a gift of the spirit, but it's a theological virtue. Giving and showing mercy are virtues, even if they are spirit-gifts. So this list is fairly complete, excluding virtues. No doubt Paul himself would admit other gifts of the Spirit, and so would we. At the end of our previous study, I listed more. But this is a sufficiently representative list from Paul.

In his epistles, Paul mentions prophecy often. Above all, he provides proportion: 1 Corinthians 13:8-10: *Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.* Paul saw prophecy in the context of love, as he saw everything. However exciting prophecy is, it's temporary, passing away to perfect Love. Tongues and knowledge are also steps toward perfection, or God, as they merge into Love Himself. Though passing, prophecy is very useful, as Paul says in 1 Cor 14: 1-3: *Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries. But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation.* When Paul edified, exhorted and consoled his flock, he prophesied. By this definition, his epistles overflow with prophesy. Through two thousand years, his prophesies ring out to all Christ's followers.

1 Thes 3:11 shows prophesy by exhorting: *You likewise know how we exhorted every one of you, as a father does his children, how we encouraged and pleaded with you to make your lives worthy of the God who calls you to his kingship and glory.* Here Paul praises the value of prophecy to encourage us toward God. Christ comes to ransom us from sin, so that we can follow Him as King. Because whoever sees Jesus sees the Father and the Spirit, the Trinity is King of our hearts. If we accept salvation, we want Jesus to rule us, to establish His kingdom. This glorifies God by admitting His love for us. It is all about accepting His infinite love. Paul urges us to accept God, thus to glorify Him.

Similarly, you have your favorite quotes of Paul edifying and consoling his flock. To edify is to build up. Paul loves to build us up in Christ. 1 Thessalonians 5:11 exemplifies his constant edifying, along with exhorting: *Therefore encourage one another and build up one another, just as you also are doing.* This is the finest kind of edification, because he commends them for what they are doing. Then he assures them that they can keep accomplishing this building. Paul is popular in all ages precisely because his touching exhortations build us up. They also console us. This is the advantage of Love: it encompasses everything. Jesus showed that Love is the center of existence. There's no more important act than love. It radiates all the virtues at once. Love-acts simultaneously: edify, consol, exhort, and express all virtue. Jesus shows us how, Paul takes Him seriously, so he imitates Him. We strive to take them both seriously, and imitate them.

A fine example of consoling us is 2 Corinthians 1:3-7: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.* We can spend a life time unpacking the many meanings this passage conveys. It rings so true because it illuminates our experience. Indeed, God, Father of mercies, is comfort Himself. Though we usually ignore Him, we realize as we emerge from distress, that His comfort consoled us. However much we suffer, as Paul says, comfort grows along with affliction. Looking back upon our darkest hours, we find merciful Love sustaining us through it all. Among Paul's wonderful expressions, this one strikes closest to our hearts because he reminds us that Jesus shared our sufferings. Actually Jesus suffered much more than we, to console us, and thus prophesy.

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 illustrates how comfort works: ***Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word.*** All comfort is from our Lord Jesus Christ. He and the Father and the Spirit are ONE. God is the infinite source of both consolation and of the virtue of hope. It's His gift, or grace. But comfort isn't just feeling good. It is a way to live, in every good work and word. Comfort names one facet of Love. If a person loves, then a person consoles, and thereby prophesizes. St Francis once said: "Let's go preach to the people." Then he and the monk walked silently among them. Love oozed from them to the people, preaching the only message worth proclaiming. Philemon 1:7 says this exceptionally well: ***For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.*** Love refreshes, just as God's Love creates. Prophecy is love expressed.

1 Corinthians 14:6 combines several of the gifts in one expression: ***But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching?*** Actually, the Spirit is ONE: all gifts fit together. We divide them to focus more perfectly upon them. After we focus clearly, we know, and can integrate all our knowledge into ONE. Prophecy reveals God's love for us. So do tongues and revelation and knowledge. We distinguish them to understand, but they live as ONE. 1 Corinthians 14:22 shows how tongues function: ***So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers, but to those who believe.*** Unbelievers need something unusual to know that Christ is present in His followers. Tongues show God to them. So tongues are not a big deal in the Church, where prophecy is the great sign. If we exhort, encourage, and console, then we prophesy. Then we edify the Church, the Body of Christ, the glory of God. But tongues are worthwhile signs for nonbelievers. Incidentally, they can encourage believers, but Paul prefers prophecy.

Paul is even more enthusiastic about knowledge and wisdom. Romans 11:33-36 sings: ***Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has first given to him, that it might be paid back to him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.*** This hymn of glory to God reveals Paul's wonder at Truth Himself. God shares his wisdom and knowledge with us. These gifts surpass mere signs because they identify us with God's deeper spiritual acts. God's revelation overwhelms us, unsearchable and unfathomable as His ways are. Paul's rhetoric highlights the difference between God's knowledge and ours by sharp questions. Who has known the Lord's mind, or counseled him? Who taught God, so He could pay it back to us?

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 1 Cor 1:18-21 The most obvious gift of God's wisdom is Christ's cross. When the Spirit gives us knowledge and understanding of this wisdom, His gifts transform us. Before these gifts, we repeated the slogans that people claimed were wise. That acquiescence arouses Paul's sarcastic "wisdom of the wise". God destroys it. The less developed fraud: "cleverness of the clever", means sharp business deals, like selling failed mortgages as securities. God doesn't have to destroy them. They destroy themselves, as recent experience attests. God merely sets them aside. Those who claim to be wise evaporate in the light and heat of God's wisdom. Ultimately this is God's prophecy, which the world calls foolishness, but which saves those who believe.

For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 1 Cor 1:22-25. Paul affirms that real wisdom is Christ crucified. In spite of those who reject Jesus, He is the Word of God, the sacrament of God, Revelation in the Flesh. Because Christ is God, he manifests God's power and wisdom. If God had any foolishness, it would be wiser than the wisest man. If God had any weakness it would be stronger than the strongest man. These expressions strike us because they stretch words toward God.

In 1 Corinthians 2:3-12 Paul sums all this up: ***I was with you in weakness, and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written, "Things which the eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him." For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.*** Real wisdom is the Spirit. By His gifts, the Spirit inspires us, spirits us, to raise us up from bodily dis-

tractions. Wisdom guides us to the supreme Spirit-gift, which is Love. In Love, we surpass what eye can see, and ear hear. We consider what never had entered man's heart: Love Himself. Spirit, searching all things, even God. Amazing. Amen.