

St. Mary's Sermon Series

1 Corinthians 12

An Introduction to Spiritual gifts.

This is the start of new sermon series which I am quite excited about, looking at the gifts of the Holy Spirit. I want to echo Paul's concern in writing to the Corinthians, "I do not want you to be ignorant about Spiritual gifts". This subject has been widely neglected in the majority of church circles, while in other circles it has received an unhealthy focus. I am aware that some of us have been put off because we have seen or heard the gifts being misused.

We went to Bath to hear John & Carol Arnott from Toronto. The worship was great and they gave some inspiring teaching but when they invited people up to be filled with the Holy Spirit my wife got cross because people were clearly being pushed over. There is no excuse for that. However, in the same meeting Candice received prayer for a hip problem she has had since birth and, as Di watched, she saw the hip straighten and the leg grew to the same size as the other one, resulting in her no longer needing to have blocks in one of her shoes. It is possible to miss out on the blessings that God wants to give to us.

My purpose, through this sermon, is to set the scene and lay down some basic ground rules which I hope we will bear in mind as we go through the whole series. My hope is that, throughout the series, we will give some clear, simply teaching on the various gifts, showing how they are important and relevant for us today. My aim is not to just give us the theory about the gifts but also to whet our appetite so that we ask God to release the gifts among us so that we can begin to experience them for ourselves and begin to minister in them. I am convinced that if we use the gifts correctly they will have a positive effect on the life of the church and help us to be more effective in our witness and mission. Saying that reminds me of a very important reason why God gives the gift of the spirit to us. They are given, not for our benefit so that we appear to be super spiritual but, so that God can bless other people through us.

The first question that needs to be addressed is: Why should we bother with the gifts of the spirit? The simple answer to that question is: Because St Paul thought that they were important. In 1 Cor. 14 vs. 1 Paul urges the believers to eagerly desire the spiritual gifts, ". . . especially that you may prophecy". Not an optional extra for the super keen but an essential part of the life of the church. Many people in our country today have written the church off as powerless because we have ignored the gifts of the spirit. Many people believe wrongly that spiritualists etc are more powerful than Christians!!!!

The New Testament contains several lists of the gift of the Spirit. While there is some overlap between the different lists there is no one comprehensive list. So, for the purposes of this series, I have chosen to focus on the list which is contained within Paul's most comprehensive teaching on the subject - 1 Cor. Ch 12-14.

The second important thing to say is that, in this particular series, we are not talking about natural abilities. Of course we need to recognise that all our natural talents come from God and that we should thank him for them and seek to use them to the very best of our ability.

Paul uses a Greek word “energemata” in describing the gifts that refer to the source of their power. They are not natural abilities which we use in our human strength. Rather, they are an expression of the power of God the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is like an electric current - invisible yet real. The gifts of the spirit are like footlights illuminated by this current. They are manifestations of the power at work in them. The one on whom these lights are focused is the Lord Jesus Christ who should always stand centre stage in the church.

Thirdly, what about the Fruits of the spirit? Aren't they just as important as the gifts? Yes, they are. I am not suggesting for one minute that we should pursue the gift of the spirit to the detriment of the fruit of the spirit. It is not a case of either/or but both and, if we are to avoid some of the mistakes of the past it is essential that we also continue to grow in the fruits of the spirit. Again Paul makes this very clear in his teaching on spiritual gifts. In the past we have forgotten that his famous teaching on love comes in the middle of his teaching on the gifts of the spirit. I am sure he has done this deliberately to remind us that, if we are going use the gifts of the spirit effectively in the way they are meant to be used then we must do so in love. Mark Stibbe says “we must be more preoccupied with the power of love than the love of power”.

I'm sure that there are some people today who would say “I have always been taught and led to believe that the gifts are not available for us today”.

In contemporary Christianity there are three main views on the gifts of the spirit:

1. The liberal view: Spiritual gifts like miraculous works did not happen in the time of the apostles. It follows naturally on from that position that they don't happen today either.
2. The conservative view: Spiritual gifts like miraculous works did happen in biblical times but don't happen today.
3. The Pentecostal charismatic view: Spiritual gifts like miraculous works did happen in biblical times and also happen today.

So, what evidence is there that the gifts are available for us today?

The most important clue can be found in 1 Cor. 13:8-10 where Paul states that prophecy, tongues and knowledge will cease when perfection comes. What does Paul mean by this?

There are two ways that this verse has traditionally been understood:

1. The Gifts of the spirit were in operation up until the finishing of the Canon of Scripture (i.e. the completion of the Bible). Since this happened a long time ago the Gifts of the Spirit are not available to us today. This has been adopted by the conservative view.
2. The Gifts of the spirit will be in operation until Jesus returns. The perfection which Paul speaks about is the return of Jesus to establish his kingdom in its fullness. They will cease then because they will no longer be necessary as we shall see God face to face and have that full revelation of Him.

The second view makes plain senses of the scripture. Paul teaching is clear that the Gifts of the Spirit are essential for the in between time - for the time between Jesus first coming and his eventual return.

Church history reveals that there have been plenty of examples of the gifts of the spirit in operation over the last 2000 years. This is what Irenaeus wrote in the second century:

"For some drive out demons with certainty and truth, so that often those who have themselves been cleansed from evil spirits believe and are in the Church, and some have foreknowledge of things to be, and visions and prophetic speech, and others cure the sick by the laying on of hands and make them whole, and as we have said, the dead have been raised and remain with us for many years. And why should I say more? It is not possible to tell the number of the gifts which the Church throughout the whole world, having received them from God in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, uses each day for the benefit of the heathen, deceiving none and making profit from none. For, as it received freely from God, it ministers also freely." (Mark Stibbe - Know your spiritual gifts page 13)

The Gifts of the Spirit derive from the Triune God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They originate in the Father, are given by the Son and are mediated in the power of the Holy Spirit. No one can boast about there gifts because they are first and foremost concrete expressions of God's grace. This much is indicated by the word which Paul coins to describe these gifts - charismata. The word derives from the root word charis meaning grace. Grace, in turn, is the love and favours which God showers on undeserving sinners like you and me. By using the word charismata, for the gifts of the spirit, Paul is making a concerted effort to prevent people from seeing the gifts in terms of natural abilities alone. He wanted us to

understand that the gifts are unmerited endowments, not personal achievements. They are God's birthday presents given to every new born believer.

I would like to finish by drawing out some important teaching from Paul's illustration of the body:

1. As we have already said, the gifts are given for the common good. They are to build us up, not tear us down; to strengthen not weaken.

The problem in Corinth was that some people were focusing on the more spectacular gifts and claiming that they were a sort of "spiritual elite" because they had these gifts. Nowhere does Paul forbid them from using the gifts but goes on to remind them that everyone in the body of Christ is given Gifts of the Spirit.

2. Paul gives some very clear teaching on how many gifts of the spirit we can expect to receive.

As individuals we will all receive at least one gift but not all of them. But it is God's intention that within the whole body all the gifts are present. So Paul asks the question "are all apostles and are all prophets?" with the clear answer "No!". And to drive the point home Paul says that gifts are given "to one a word of wisdom, to another a word of knowledge, to another etc."

These verses indicate that every Christian has a particular manifestation which Paul describes as a grace gift given by the Holy Spirit as he determines. This does not mean that we are destined to only receive one gift during the course of our lives. As we shall see, as we look at the various gifts in more detail, the truth of the matter is that we are all suppose to have the gift of prophecy and it is Paul's desire that everyone of us should speak in tongues. On top of these we will very likely have a primary gift. For example, this might be teaching which could also be accompanied by a word of wisdom or knowledge - all sorts of permutations are possible. The important thing to recognise is that no one has all the gifts because the way God designed the gifts to work is that we need other members of the body of Christ to complement our gifts.

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