

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, you were deceived and somehow led away to mute idols. ³Therefore I am informing you that no one speaking by God's Spirit says, "A curse be upon Jesus," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴There are various kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵There are different kinds of ministries, and yet the same Lord. ⁶There are various kinds of activity, but the same God, who produces all of them in everyone.

⁷Each person is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one person a message of wisdom is given by the Spirit; to another, a message of knowledge, as the same Spirit provides it; ⁹by the same Spirit, faith is given to someone else; and to another, the same Spirit gives healing gifts. ¹⁰Another is given powers to do miracles; another, the gift of prophecy; another, the evaluating of spirits; someone else, different kinds of tongues; and another, the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹One and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them to each one individually as he desires.

Spiritual Gifts

I.

Most things made by human beings are neither good nor bad in and of themselves, are they? Take the television. It's just a screen with speakers a person can look at and listen to. Is it good or evil? It really depends on how you use it. Many think of the television as a waste of time—just a box on which you watch hours and hours of mindless entertainment. But it can also be used for instructional purposes. You can use television to be more informed about things going on in the world. Programs that have been produced to teach you history or to build your body of knowledge about all kinds of subjects.

Other screens, along with the internet to drive the information age, have come along to expand the opportunities for both good and evil. Crimes can be carried out online. Hoaxes can be perpetrated to snare the unwary. But at the same time, there is a growing, seemingly ever-expanding universe of valuable information and instruction to be used for good. Not only has this phenomenon been useful to secular society, but Christianity has been able to use the Internet to reach people in ways that were never before possible.

It isn't the *thing* that is good or evil, it is the way that it's used.

Does this also apply to the spiritual gifts Paul talks about in today's lesson? "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. ²You know that when you were pagans, you were deceived and somehow led away to mute idols" (1 Corinthians 12:1-2, EHV). Paul reminds us that ecstasy is not limited to Christians. Before they were believers, this group of Corinthians got carried away by false gods. All kinds of worship can seem very attractive to the human psyche, and they willingly followed a path that would *not* lead them to heaven. It was deceptive. It was dangerous.

Now that they were Christians, the danger existed that they would be carried away by ecstasy *within* Christianity. One of the spiritual gifts that was most in vogue was speaking in tongues. For some groups that is *still* the most desired spiritual gift even today. It had become a problem among the Corinthian Christians—you can tell by how much Paul refers to that one particular spiritual gift in chapters 12-14 of this letter.

II.

Back in the 1940's a man named George Reavis wrote a fable called *The Animal School* (<https://tinyurl.com/ycz97c52>). The animals of the forest organized a school and created a curriculum. There was running and climbing and swimming and flying. Each student among the animals was supposed to become proficient at all of them.

The duck was excellent in swimming. In fact, better than his instructor. But he made only passing grades in flying and was very poor in running. Since he was slow in running, he had to stay after school and also drop swimming in order to practice running. This was kept up until his webbed feet were badly worn and he was only average in swimming. But average was acceptable in school so nobody worried about that, except the duck.

Other animals found themselves having problems in areas that were not their expertise as well. Every one of the animals became frustrated trying to master things they could not. Reavis ended his story by asking: "Does this fable have a moral?"

Perhaps the animal school developed because one animal looked longingly at a talent another animal had. If only the rabbit could fly. If only the eagle could run. The duck tried so hard to get more proficient at running that he dropped to average in the things he *could* do well.

How does this fable relate to spiritual gifts? Some Christians look at others with jealousy. The Corinthians had moved speaking in tongues up to the top of the list of desirable spiritual gifts. They seemed to be saying: "I can't speak in tongues, but that's what I want to do, so I'm going to become upset with God and my fellow believers unless somehow I can develop the ability I desire."

I suppose that in our circles speaking in tongues is not the be-all to end-all that some still hold it up to be. But perhaps you have seen the spiritual gifts and abilities of others and have become envious. Perhaps you have demeaned your own talents and abilities, especially when you compare what you are able to do with what others do. Perhaps you don't even recognize anything spiritual in *any* of *your* talents and abilities. Even worse, perhaps the abilities you have you believe to be your own, not gifts from God.

The Corinthians used the gift of tongues-speaking as a badge of honor for themselves, not as something with which to glorify God. Perhaps you are guilty of condescension in the gifts you have been given—wanting others to take note and pat you on the back for your spectacular abilities and your generous use of them with others.

III.

Which spiritual gift modern Christians would move to the top of the list is, perhaps, open to debate. The Corinthians had chosen speaking in tongues as their number one priority in Christian life. Paul moves it to the bottom. Many other things, he says, are even more important.

"Therefore I am informing you that no one speaking by God's Spirit says, 'A curse be upon Jesus,' and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3, EHV). When a person has been led by the Holy Spirit to abandon pagan ways, calling out curses on the Lord Jesus would just stick in our throats. And so, at the top of the heap of spiritual gifts, is the ability to say: "Jesus is Lord." That is something human beings cannot do without the Holy Spirit working in them and through them.

In other words, the most important spiritual gift is the gift of faith. Without faith,

absolutely everything else is worthless. Every one of us has sinned against God by our condescension and our envy and our elevating of other things above God, and even by our misuse of knowledge and technology that could and should be used for good rather than evil. It is faith which recognizes that despite these sins and shortcomings, Jesus loved us so much that he died for us. It is faith that says that, even though at times we *still* elevate our own knowledge or abilities above our desire for God, Jesus *is* Lord—Jesus *has* loved us enough to buy us back from sin to be his own dearly loved people. Faith tops the list. Faith is what makes every other gift useful.

“There are various kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:4, EHV). It is God the Holy Spirit who gives all the different kinds of gifts to all the different kinds of people who follow Jesus.

“There are different kinds of ministries, and yet the same Lord. “There are various kinds of activity, but the same God, who produces all of them in everyone” (1 Corinthians 12:5-6, EHV). The ministry of the gospel here at Holy Trinity is different from any other place I have ever been. Every setting in which you find the gospel being used is unique, yet we all serve the same Lord Jesus. In all the various activities of ministry in this and every place, it is *God* who *produces* all the gifts we use.

“Each person is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7, EHV). Creatures in the animal school might have wanted to gain a new skill so as to have a newfound advantage. The eagle would like to gain even more advantage in attacking the rabbit, while the rabbit would like to have greater abilities to escape the eagle. Spiritual gifts are not to be used for private advantage, or in competition with one another, but to further God’s kingdom. Christians are not to use their gifts to set themselves apart as superior to others. Instead, each believer is able to contribute uniquely to the work of the church. As the Holy Spirit himself is at work within the congregation of believers, he uses all these unique gifts and talents to bind the group of individuals together tightly as a functioning body.

IV.

What are your gifts? And how will you or *do* you use them? The list Paul gives is by no means exhaustive—God gives other spiritual gifts that are not listed here. Any talent or ability a person has that can be used to give glory to God or work within God’s Kingdom and in his Church can rightly be called a spiritual gift. Paul’s order loosely indicates some level of importance, as well.

“To one person a message of wisdom is given by the Spirit; to another, a message of knowledge, as the same Spirit provides it; ⁹by the same Spirit, faith is given to someone else” (1 Corinthians 12:8-9, EHV). The first batch of gifts are gifts of intelligent and thoughtful speech. It might seem that such gifts are limited to people who are Called Workers and communicate God’s Word on a professional level. Not so. The Sunday School teacher imparts knowledge to students of God’s Word just the same. So does a parent who teaches his or her children in the home. So also a believer who speaks about the love of God to those who don’t know Jesus. Speaking the message of salvation to another person should never be demeaned.

“To another, the same Spirit gives healing gifts. ¹⁰Another is given powers to do miracles; another, the gift of prophecy” (1 Corinthians 12:9-10, EHV). God hasn’t promised every kind of spiritual gift in exactly the same way they were found in the New Testament to every

generation of believers. People of today are able to bring healing to others in ways that could not even be fathomed by the Corinthians. Many of the modern marvels we are able to use today to bring the gospel to others would be considered miraculous by Paul. As for the gift of prophecy, it is more than just telling about future events—to prophesy means to speak God’s Word to people. That is something God’s people can still do very well today.

“Another, the evaluating of spirits; someone else, different kinds of tongues; and another, the interpretation of tongues” (1 Corinthians 12:10, EHV). Each believer is to do his or her best to evaluate the spirits—working with God’s Word to determine whether preachers or teachers bringing what seem to be messages of wisdom or knowledge are conforming to the known Word of God. Not everyone has a gift of tongues to use the gift of language to translate God’s Word to be brought to more and more people in the world. Those who do should use such gifts to God’s glory alone. Those who don’t have such gifts support those who do and give thanks to God that he has continued to provide his church with such dedicated people who use the gift of language to spread the gospel throughout the world.

“One and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them to each one individually as he desires” (1 Corinthians 12:11, EHV). At the end of his brief list Paul returns the focus to God. We are not to focus on the individuals or the personalities of those who possess various spiritual gifts from God, but on God the Holy Spirit who gives these gifts and works through these gifts in his Church.

Give thanks to God for the gifts he has given *you*. Use them for God’s Kingdom. Give thanks that God has given many great and useful gifts to others for use in his Kingdom. Pray that many more would be led through the distribution of these good gifts to confess by the power of the Holy Spirit: “Jesus is Lord.” Amen.