

1 Corinthians 12:3-11

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.

Gifts for the Common Good

I.

"What a waste of talent!" That might be the first thing you think or say when you see someone not living up to his/her potential. Usually there is some factor that is limiting potential. Drugs and alcohol can take over a person's life, so much so that every dollar acquired by any means is poured back into the addiction. Sometimes it's laziness. Good enough is good enough—why exert so much effort when one can easily get by? Perhaps for some there is insecurity—those who don't have a very high opinion of themselves live down to their lack of belief in their own abilities.

Paul started today's Second Reading with the word "therefore." Remember that anytime you see a word like "therefore" it is directing your attention to what came before. Looking back into the previous chapter we find that some within the Corinthian congregation were misusing the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Paul used his discussion of such misuse as a launching pad to a broader discussion. He began chapter 12 by saying: "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).

Back then being a pagan meant perhaps worshiping at the temple of an idol. Bringing money or food to that idol and literally bowing down and worshiping false gods. There were plenty of them to choose from. There were gods of fertility, gods of the seas, gods who you could seek to help you with your farming—or some other occupation, perhaps.

II.

The fact that you are here today seems to indicate you are no longer pagans—that is, a non-religious person, or even a religious person who is opposed to Christianity. I read a statistic this week that says that, even among people in the US who identify themselves as "churchgoers," over 57% did not attend in person *or watch online* in the previous month. 57% of people who say they are Christian did not consider worship of God important enough to bother with even once in a month's time!

There is clearly a spiritual deficit these days. Worship of the true God, even by those who claim to know him, simply isn't seen as very important.

Perhaps you could say that the other gods of today are more subtle than in days gone by.

Sure, there are gods like Buddha and Allah; there are religions that *claim* to be Christian, but don't worship the Triune God. But most of the gods wouldn't be thought of as gods at all. Lutherans learn in our study of the First Commandment that gods are anything or anyone you devote your time and attention to—anything or anyone you place above God in the first position in your life.

When you apply *that* definition, people of today have all kinds of gods. Entertainment gods place high on the list. Recreation gods are right up there, too; many might choose their recreation gods on a long holiday weekend. Family gods are right in the mix. Personal time and hobbies round out the top four categories.

God says: "You shall have no other gods beside me" (Exodus 20:3, EHV). Perhaps you learned it the way I did—"before me." Literally, the Hebrew says "in front of my face." No matter which translation you choose, God is saying believers are to worship him *exclusively*. Study of God's Ten Commandments shows us that every single time we violate *any* commandment, we are putting someone or something ahead of God.

III.

"When you *were* pagans," Paul said. False gods pop up like a relapse into addiction. Even Christians still sin, so Christians still find false gods in their lives.

In your current existence, however, there is a difference from the time you were pagans. Paul says: "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). Boil these two phrases down. If you have faith, you will not want to curse Jesus. Only *by* faith can you acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior.

In other words, the primary spiritual gift is the gift of faith. Faith is the evidence that the Holy Spirit is living in you; that you are a child of God.

Faith turns your head when there is a relapse and you put something over God. Your eyes focus once again on the cross and you give thanks that your Lord and Savior willingly gave himself into death for your sins so you could move forward in faith once again.

Without faith, you can do nothing for Jesus. Without faith, there are no other spiritual gifts in the toolbox.

IV.

"There are various kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:4, EHV). You have faith, and with faith the Holy Spirit has given you other gifts—additional gifts.

Paul has a list of gifts in today's reading. Some people tend to think that one particular spiritual gift makes a person a better Christian—that of speaking in tongues. Not foreign languages, but some special spirit-language that brings one closer to God. The Corinthians highly valued this gift, too. Paul, however, puts it last in his list. Why? He says: "Each person is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7, EHV).

The Holy Spirit gives gifts for the common good—that is, for the good of the whole church. Speaking in a special spirit-language in prayer to God wouldn't build up the rest of God's people who were gathered for worship, therefore it was of lesser importance in Paul's view. Later in his letter Paul said: "I would like all of you to speak in tongues, but I would prefer that you prophesy. For the person who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets so that the church may be built up" (1 Corinthians 14:5, EHV). Those who hear someone speaking to God in a special spirit-language can't learn and grow in faith. Such a spiritual gift, then, is only good for the individual. That's not the way the Holy Spirit gives his gifts to the church.

“Each 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” (1 Corinthians 12:7-10, EHV).

In every age and generation it is important that the gifts of wisdom and knowledge are in the church. The message of salvation *needs* to be taught. It *needs* to go out. What Jesus has done on the cross is important for everyone to hear.

You don’t have to be a scholar to use the wisdom and knowledge God has given you. Review your catechism. Refresh your memory through daily devotions. Be prepared to share what Jesus has done for all with your friends and family.

Others will do those tasks more formally. Pastors and teachers in the church make it their life’s work to share the gospel. They study continuously as they prepare each day to bring these eternal truths to people.

You will notice in Paul’s list some things that aren’t so evident today. When Paul wrote this letter, the various books and letters of the New Testament hadn’t been gathered into one volume, yet. Miracles and healing were ways that people might identify proclaimers of the gospel to be actual servants of Jesus.

The church didn’t need architects and building committees. The groups were small enough that they usually met in the homes of members.

Today, the Holy Spirit gives to one architectural ability. To some others, the ability to meet in committee to sift through all the ideas and decide which are for phase one, and which are to be set aside for phases two and three.

To others the Holy Spirit gives capability in financial matters, to count the offerings and record them; to manage the books; to consider the necessary expenses and work with others to produce a budget.

To still others the Holy Spirit gives an understanding of today’s technology so the livestream can reach those who are not able to attend in person; to project the service on the screen, and other tech gifts.

To some the Holy Spirit gives gifts to maintain the church property. To others the willingness to serve as ushers.

“One and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them to each one individually as he desires” (1 Corinthians 12:11, EHV). Thanks be to God that he gives so many and such varied gifts to his people! Each is important. Each should be used to the glory of God.

“There 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” (1 Corinthians 12:4-6, EHV).

No matter where you find yourself in life, remember that the Holy Spirit is working in you. Remember that the Holy Spirit gives gifts for the common good. Amen.