

Sermon 37: 1 Corinthians 12:1-3: Introducing Spiritual Gifts

OUTLINE

The spirit of error
The Spirit of truth

INTRODUCTION

We come now to a most important matter, spiritual gifts. Sadly, as with many of God's good gifts, the Corinthian church is dogged by problems concerning the gifts. Like ourselves, there is the problem of excess; of self-promotion; of divisions; of seeking the spectacular; of elitism; of ignorance; bringing down the name of Christ in the name of the gifts, and many other problems. Chapters 12-14 are a three chapter section dealing with this matter. It is clear from 12:1 where Paul says 'now concerning,' that he is answering a question that the Corinthians put to him in a letter. The exact wording of their question is not clear but Paul's strategy in answering them is. It is likely that their question related to tongues, the whole of chapter 14 addresses this matter in depth. However, Paul does not merely answer questions directly, ever the teacher he turns it into a teaching moment. It appears from the details of this section that there was a real problem with some Corinthians thinking that tongues because of its spectacular nature thought that this was the best gift, the most important gift, the gift that should be given all the air time in the worship service; and this was combined with attitudes of superiority; and resulted in exclusion of so called inferior gifts. It seems that some were made to feel they were not spiritual people because they did not manifest tongues. By the instructions that Paul gives it appears that things were chaotic; divided; loveless and in need of a radical overhaul. How would you address this problem; what truths would you highlight; how would you begin to address this matter? These are the questions that help us make sense of the topics raised in 12-14.

It has been pointed out that Paul's method for dealing with spiritual gifts is the same as dealing with meat offered to idols. You will remember that Paul took three chapters and made it a teaching moment. He spoke about loveless practice; important truths that had been neglected in their thinking; how things appear to unbelievers as an important consideration and how all their actions should glorify God by edifying others. Paul has a similar approach here to the gifts. You can see how he goes back to the foundational matters and builds up their understanding before addressing the matter at hand in chapter 14. Look at the structure before you. In 12:1-3 Paul introduces the spiritual gifts, it seems to be a strange introduction until you see that Paul is demonstrating that every believer has been taught by the Spirit and been enabled by the Spirit to say 'Jesus is Lord' proving that every Christian is spiritual. In 12:4-11 Paul shows how the Spirit enables more than one type of gift, how every believer has a gift, and God sovereignly distributes them, it is not an indication of who is important but an act of sovereign grace. In 12:12-31 Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are not isolated individuals but members of a body; this underlying reality of our unity as the body of Christ feeds into how the gifts are to operate, how none are inferior or to be left out, or how one type of gift cannot be the only thing that is done. Chapter 13, the famous chapter on love is there to show how love must guide how we use our gifts. Chapter 14 then talks about the nature and use of tongues and here Paul reminds them that unbelievers who come into the service have to be considered as well.

Today we will be looking at 12:1-3. Many have rushed over these verses to get at the juicy stuff later on and failed to see the significance of this section. This section is important because of the most fundamental truth that these elitist Corinthians need to hear. They have been thinking that they are truly spiritual because they can speak in tongues, Paul reminds them that any person who is a Christian has the Spirit; is Spirit taught, you cannot be converted apart from the work of the Spirit. So in exploring this section we have two points, we want to note the spirit of error that guides us in our unbelief; and the Spirit of truth that teaches us and informs us when we are saved.

The spirit of error

V1, 'Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.' You will notice from your ESV footnote that there is an alternate translation, the Greek literally reads, 'now concerning spirituals.' It could be spiritual persons or spiritual gifts, translators have to make a choice. Either one could work. Paul could be saying now concerning your question about who is a spiritual person/ who is truly spiritual.... Or he could be saying now concerning your question about the things/gifts of the Spirit.... Most favor 'spiritual gifts' though neither affects the overall meaning of the text.

Once again Paul addresses the Corinthians as brothers, as brethren in Christ. He is constantly reinforcing the unity that they have, a unity wrought by the Spirit. This unity will be expanded at length in this chapter.

And once again Paul implies who think they know it all are in fact ignorant. This ignorance we see has already gotten them into serious trouble. They thought they knew about idols being nothing but were ignorant of the fact that demons lie behind idols. Here we see that they think they know about spiritual gifts, but Paul sees some very basic gaps in their knowledge that he now feels the need to fill in.

V2, 'You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led.' Paul wants to contrast the way all believers are led by the Spirit when they believe, to the way we are misled when unsaved. Here in v2 as Paul speaks to the Corinthians he reminds them of their past. He reminds them that they were 'pagans'. The word is literally 'ethne' the nations. This is typically a Jewish description. Israel was the nation, and every other nation was called the nations. Paul then contrasts the way we learn the truth of Christ to the way we were led into lies and deception. A key word to appreciate is the word 'led.' Paul is here alluding to the fact that despite our claim to being independent and making up our own minds and using our intellect to determine the truth. When we are unbelievers, we are sinners who are turned away from God, who are manipulated by satan to pursue the lusts of our bodies and minds, and to believe lies that result in all sorts of idolatry. Paul describes this in Eph. 2:1-3, 'And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.' What we take to be us pursuing and exercising our freedom; or us flexing our intellect and reason Paul reveals to be a willing self-deception where we dance to the tune of the Pied Piper, satan. Eph. 4:18-19, 'They are darkened in their

understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.' A hardness of heart increases ignorance towards spiritual things. This is the impact of our sin upon ourselves. As we look out on the world today, unbelievers claim to be in control of themselves, to know truth, Paul reveals that our infinite capacity for self-deception drives us to believe what we want to believe. The desires of our hearts, the inclinations of our sinfulness make certain excuses and explanations more 'reasonable' more 'true' and we gladly accept those explanations that justify the sinful things we want.

But Paul is not only alluding to the willful self-deception, but the demonic deception that had us in our idolatrous beliefs as well. 2 Cor. 4:4 reminds us that the devil who is titled the god of this age blinds the minds of unbelievers. There is such a thing as demonic deception, of lying signs and wonders, of real spiritual experiences that are an experience of the demonic not the Spirit of God. No doubt Paul is assuming all of this as part of the ways we were led into error and false religions. Ecstatic utterances, false prophecies, spiritual visitations, dreams and visions, whatever true or false spiritual experiences not wrought by the Spirit of God. With the influx of Eastern ideas into a spiritually thirsty West, we are going to see more and more people experiencing this false spirituality. Some of it will be wishful thinking and merely psychological but others will truly encounter the demonic and think they have stumbled upon 'the truth.'

Notice as well Paul's characterization of the idols as 'mute idols.' Now this is not a denial of the demonic element behind these things that he mentioned in chapter 10, but a typical OT way of describing the inability of these idols who are not God compared to the omnipotent power of the true God. God knows the end from the beginning, they do not; God reveals what will be, they do not.

V3, 'Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" Paul does not only deal with the non-Jewish unbelief but with Jewish unbelief as well. In contrast to the Spirit teaching us to call Jesus Lord, Paul now contrasts this with the Jewish unbelief. Deut. 21:23 teaches us that anyone who is hanged upon a tree is under the curse of God, his death a sign of God's judgement upon his crimes. The Jews saw Jesus hanging upon the cross and claimed that He was accursed. They took this to be proof that Jesus could not be the Messiah. But technically Jesus was accursed because He is the Messiah, though He is not accursed anymore, and this proven by the resurrection. This we know is the clear teaching of Is. 53:4-6, this was a prophecy given 700 years before the birth of Christ now coming to pass, Jesus becoming a curse as He pays for our sins, 'Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.' Jesus was cursed with the curse we deserved. Not cursed by satan but by God as 53:10 makes clear, 'Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief.' Paul helps us to see the significance of this Gal. 3:13, 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.' The problem with the Jewish statement that Jesus is accursed is not in affirming that Jesus truly underwent the curse of God as He took our judgement day punishment for us,

but in their insistence that He is still accursed. Paul makes very clear that Jesus Christ was raised by God as a vindication 1 Tim. 3:16, and that He was given the name above all names. Jesus paid the price for our sins by becoming sin for us in order that we might become the righteousness of God. He was accursed and is no more and this is our hope. He was still cursed He would still be dead, but He was raised as proof of His own righteousness and our sins being paid for in full.

Paul overall point here is that wrong views of Christ reveal that the Spirit of God is not teaching the unbeliever the truth. We can expand this to include all errors concerning Christ. Those who deny that Jesus is both fully God and fully man are not taught by the Spirit of God. John makes this clear 1 John 4:2-3, 'By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.' For those who claim that Jesus is a myth; or a useful belief; or merely a political figure; or an idealistic teacher of love; or only a prophet; or someone who had actualized their own inward divinity, or any other thing contrary to the clear teaching of the Bible which is written by the Spirit. This is proof that they are not taught by the Spirit of God.

The Spirit of truth

We come now to Paul's final statement in his introduction, v3b, 'and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.' Many have thought that the import of this statement is to act as a test of whether a prophecy is true or false, you can know all true prophecy by the fact it says Jesus is Lord, and all false prophecy by the fact that it says Jesus is accursed. No doubt this is true, but Paul is doing something more basic yet more profound than offering us a way to test ecstatic speech. This is supported by the fact that many can say Jesus is Lord but not from the heart making it useless as a way to test whether something is inspired. For example Jesus Himself reveals that many will prophesy in His name and say to Him on that day 'Lord, Lord.' No rather Paul is reminding these Corinthians who are elitist and dividing the congregation and overemphasizing their role and importance because they have an outwardly spectacular gift like tongues who think that they alone have the Spirit, that every single Christian has the Spirit. You cannot be a Christian without being taught by the Spirit. In other words, every Christian is a spiritual person. A spiritual person is not someone who dresses like a hippie, who endorses new age techniques, who learns a new vocabulary around energy and light and angels, but someone who is a Christian. You cannot be a Christian if you do not have the Spirit and to have the Spirit makes you spiritual. You don't have to be able to speak in tongues to be spiritual; or have experienced a vision; or hear God's audible voice; or do miracles. This is important. Many Christians get an inferiority complex when some claim to have a superior spiritual experience and this leads them away from a stable local church, it leads them to despise the regular ministry of the word of God, it usually ends up with them following someone with confidence who claims to hear God. Other Christians not realizing what they have fear they are missing out and start going off in search of experiences. Other Christians despising the ordinary way in which the Spirit works are always after some new thing as a proof of the Spirit among them. They get into an endless grind of constantly shedding the old and trying to do enough to get something new to happen because they do not realize that they have the Spirit already. If you are a born again Christian, you are spiritual. Full stop! You are

not a second class citizen; you are not impoverished; you have all of God's fullness within you and all the ministries of the Holy Spirit benefitting you. Granted the Spirit does many things through the church and others to serve you, but you have all you need already and don't need to feel inferior in light of others claimed experiences.

The most basic proof that Paul has is the fact that no one can become a Christian apart from the Holy Spirit. Jesus is Lord is the Christian's basic confession of faith. Rom. 10:9-10, 'because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.' Thomas on the day the resurrected Christ appeared to His disciples confessed, 'My Lord and my God.' The word Lord can mean many things. It can simply be a title of respect given to someone in a superior station meaning nothing more than master or teacher. But when it comes to Christ it takes on so much more meaning. Firstly, to call Jesus Lord is to call Him God. On the day of Pentecost Peter quoted Joel who said anyone who calls upon the name of the Lord/YHWH will be saved, Acts 2:21. Paul also quotes the Greek translation of YHWH as Lord and applies it to Christ. Along with Thomas we confess that Jesus is divine. Secondly, He is also the long awaited anointed one, the Son of David, the prophet, priest and king. He is the last Adam who is God's vice-regent who has been given the name above all names, made the head of the church and is now the one whose commandments we obey. We follow Him, do as He says, seek to be conformed to His image, worship Him, and pray in His name. This is of course an antidote to the cheap grace where Jesus is offered for forgiveness but there is no talk of repentance of sin. Because He is Savior and Lord we exercise both faith and repentance when we become Christians. Thirdly, as Lord and King He is also judge and will one day return at the head of the army of the saints that He will bring with Him and He will administer final justice upon all sin and all His enemies. Fourthly, as Lord He is our ruler and protector, we look to Him with confidence and trust, calling upon Him to provide and sustain us.

But no one can see the identity of Jesus as God and man and savior. No one can submit their sinful hearts to His will and giving a heartfelt allegiance to Him. No one can stop trusting in their own ideas and deeds and cast themselves as empty upon Him to save. No one can humble themselves and admit that all they have done is wrong and in need of redemption. No one can gladly turn from the sin they love and cling to the purity of God's holiness as something beautiful. No one fallen in Adam can do any of these things because of our sinful nature, what theologians call our total depravity. Or as Jesus put it, John 6:44, 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.' Salvation is not man trying His best and God doing the rest. Salvation is not man putting his mind to the problem and finding God on his own terms. No salvation is a case of sinners being dead in sin, rejecting God and God in His grace coming to search for us and draw us to Himself. No one can get saved unless the Spirit takes the truth of the gospel and drives it into our hearts and by His resurrecting power raising us from the dead spiritually, opening our blind eyes spiritually, softening our stony hearts spiritually and enabling our faith and repentance. Paul's point is that if you are a Christian you have the Spirit you have experienced God, you have been enlightened, you have no need to feel inferior or pretend that any other Christian is inferior to your spiritual experience. Every believer is saved in the same way.

So how do we apply this introduction to the spiritual gifts? We need to be aware that it is part of the human condition to get things wrong in this area. We will all need instruction in this area, we are all dependent upon God to speak to us and teach us about these things and not pretend to be experts. This demands humility and teachableness as we proceed. Secondly, we need to realize what we have as believers. We have the Spirit we have experienced miracles in our lives, we are not second rate citizens. Many drift into error out of a sense of inferiority or out of a false sense of need for outward and sensational manifestations of the Spirit. Thirdly, allow Paul to interpret the confident unbelief of the world around you, no matter what they say and how confident they appear, you have the Spirit of truth and have been taught by God, allow the word to remind you of this and don't doubt your faith. And one last application, this is by way of preparing us for what lies ahead. This is a new year, and we are beginning a section on the spiritual gifts. We will see that everyone of us is part of the body, has the Spirit and has at least one gift. These gifts are given to us to serve the body of Christ. I want to challenge you as we close to think about what those gifts you have been given are; and how will you use them in 2025? The Corinthians were consumed with comparing themselves with others and promoting themselves but Paul wants us to think about us all having the spiritual gifts to serve one another with, how will we do that?

As we come to communion now let me encourage you to think again about what Paul said about Jesus being accursed. Jesus, the innocent Son of God, became a man, to be accursed for us. He died a bloody and painful death, more than that suffered being forsaken of God, and things we cannot penetrate in payment for our sins. He was accursed, but He paid for our sins in full and He is accursed no longer. He was hung on a tree as a sign that He was cursed and paying for our sins, dying the criminals death; but He is risen from the dead as a proof that our sins are paid in full, vindicating that He is indeed sinless and we are forgiven. Let us come now thinking of this profound truth.