

Sermon 38: 1 Corinthians 12:4-7: The Basics of the Gifts

OUTLINE

The varieties of gifts
The source of the gifts
The purpose of the gifts

INTRODUCTION

When I say spiritual gifts what comes to mind? For some it speaks about the Charismatic movement and a return to the book of Acts and seeing all the signs we see in the NT functioning again in every worship service. For some it speaks of the New Apostolic Reformation, a new age of the Spirit where a return of the fivefold ministry in particular the gifts of apostle and prophet to bring about a renewal and worldwide revival and a wave of the Holy Spirit sweeping the earth. For others it speaks of 'every-member-ministry' where the Reformation was characterized by a reformation of the clergy, we now need a reformation of the laity where every believer being a priest is used by God. For others it speaks of the church growth movement where we turn small churches into mega churches through the use of spiritual gifts workshops making every Christian an oiled cog in a large machine and as each part does its part we can grow mega churches. For others it brings up ideas about the second baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues so that you can walk in victorious perfection over sin and preach the gospel with signs and wonders. For the Corinthian church spiritual gifts were a problem. The Corinthians were overemphasizing one gift above the others; they were dividing into ranks of who is important and can participate and who cannot; they were turning the gathering of God's people into a chaotic show that brought down the name of Christ. They were following their noses emphasizing the spectacular and showing their ignorance. Paul is writing to inform and correct these abuses. Last week we showed how he levelled the playing fields showing how every Christian is spiritual, every Christian is taught by the Spirit, that there are no second rate citizens based on spirituality in the church. Today Paul continuing with the foundational ideas gives us some more of the basics of the spiritual gifts. Today as we look at 12:4-7 we will see Paul emphasizing the variety of the gifts against the exclusive emphasis on one; the source of the spiritual gifts being God which should emphasize whose will is most important; and the purpose of the gifts, which is to serve others pouring cold water on the self-promoting use going on in their church.

The varieties of gifts

V4, 'Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.' Paul starts in a very obvious place. There is more than one gift that the Spirit gives. We are obliged to accommodate the Holy Spirit, but the Corinthians were only interested in a few more spectacular ways the Spirit was working in their midst. Paul reminds them of the obvious the Holy Spirit uses more than one or two gifts. This of course raises the question for us, how many gifts are there? There are various gift lists in the Bible 12:8-10, 'For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to

another the interpretation of tongues.’ V28, ‘And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.’ Rom. 12:6-8, ‘Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷ if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸ the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.’ Eph. 4:11, ‘And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.’ 1 Pet. 4:9-11, ‘Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: ¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.’ Peter’s division is thought to give us the two basic categories of speaking and serving gifts which all the gifts can fall into. By my count there are only 19 gifts mentioned, once you take away the repeats. This is not seen as an exhaustive list, but rather a token list. Several observations can be made about these lists. Firstly, tongues is only mentioned in the Corinthian lists. Secondly, we see a mention of gifts that could in fact be overlapping, for example does teaching not include knowledge and wisdom; and does not prophecy likewise include knowledge and wisdom; mercy and giving, and mercy and hospitality no doubt overlap, and so on. Thirdly, we also see gifts of office that relate to gifts of function, prophets prophesy, apostles lead, pastors teach, deacons give mercy, etc. Fourthly, we see a mix of natural and supernatural gifts.

This leads us to another question, are the spiritual gifts only those gifts that occur after salvation? Do we have gifts before we are believers? Are those with teaching gifts only teachers after they get saved? When it comes to the miraculous gifts it is obvious that the answer must be yes. However, with many of the other non-miraculous gifts, those things that would classify as natural abilities like leadership and hospitality, that these gifts are sanctified talents. How are natural abilities spiritual gifts? After salvation that Holy Spirit moves the heart of the believer to utilize these gifts in accordance with God’s will; in response to God’s grace and blessing them to bring about God’s results.

How does one know what gifts they have? Begin by looking at your natural abilities, musicians can serve in music, teachers in teaching; are you good with kids, naturally empathetic, have a capacity for storing and communicating knowledge, etc.

Past training and opportunities God’s providence extends even to before we were Christians. And so we should be looking for the cultivation of our gifts and the preparations of our ministries in our past training and opportunities. Have you trained in counselling, finance, child care, music, social upliftment, architecture, construction, catering, etc? You would be surprised to see how often your “ordinary” training fits you for essential tasks in the Church.

Answering urgent needs

Often answering urgent needs reveals dormant gifts and cultivates and sharpens your known gifts. Perhaps a shortage of Sunday School teachers gives you an opportunity to discover your teaching gift or having to lead a Bible Study when the leader is sick. Having to organise a function may reveal your administrative abilities. So respond to the needs around you, and perhaps your gifts will surface.

Desires

What is your heart's desire? God often puts a desire in our hearts to get our feet moving. Is there some desire you have, like seeing the lost saved, or helping the church discover God in worship, or seeing young Christians develop or seeing young teenage girls become godly women? This may indicate the direction of your life that God has for you!

Joys

What gives you joy? Is there a particular ministry which brings you deep satisfaction and joy? Do you feel fulfilled after visiting a shut-in or a lonely person? Do you feel complete doing tasks for others? Do you feel exhilarated after sharing the gospel (most people do)? Or from sharing a truth or a word of encouragement with someone? Joys, like desires, indicate a possible gift and purpose.

Blessing

Which area of your service experiences much blessing? When you open the Word are people taught and blown away by your insights? Do you have particular success in evangelism? Do children respond well to you? Do people seek you out for counsel or prayer? Are you able to lift up the down-hearted? Where does the Lord bless your service, this may be the place of your calling.

The Counsel of Others

What do others say are your strengths? Some of us are so self-effacing or lack confidence that often it is through the words of others that a person sees their gifts. Husbands and wives especially are to encourage and grow each other in this way. Have you had more than one person tell you that you are good at a certain something? What do mature believers feel your abilities are? Wisdom is in the counsel of many.

Your complaints

Your complaints may reveal an aptitude in a certain area that is presently being neglected. I used to criticise the worship at a Young Adults meeting, giving many points of criticism and points for improvement. The guy leading the thing was grateful that I was so keen to see it done rightly and gave me the job. Your frustrations may reveal an ability waiting to be unleashed.

Obey the general rules

All Christians are to show mercy, be hospitable, evangelise, encourage etc. And it is usually in obedience to these general commands that we discover we have a knack for some or one. God steers a moving ship! Are you obeying the general commands?

Past hurts and healing

All of us have suffered pain and brokenness, we have all been afflicted by sin in some way. And from those times we received healing, insights and lessons that we can pass on to others. Perhaps you've lost a child, or gone through a divorce, or suffered with Cancer. These things can sensitize you to the need of encouragement, physical help and teaching that others might need. This is the point Paul makes to the Corinthians in 2 Cor. 1:3-4, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.'

Please notice as you read v4-6 these phrases, 'varieties of gifts'; 'varieties of service'; 'varieties activities.' Paul uses three different words each one is loaded with the message he is wanting to emphasize to the Corinthians. Firstly the word 'gift.' In these verses Paul does not use the word 'pneumatikon' or spirituals but chooses other words which underline what is lacking in Corinth. The word for gift is 'charisma'. 'Charis' is the Greek word for grace, so that can be translated as

grace-gift. What is so interesting about this word is that it is the same word used to describe God's gift in saving us, Rom. 5:16-17, 'And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. ¹⁷ For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.' Some scholars have even suggested that this word implies that the grace that has been given to us results in a gracious giving, freely receiving we now freely give. Contrary to those in Corinth who were using the gifts as an occasion to promote themselves and look down upon others Paul chooses a word that levels all. All the gifts we have are by the Spirit and not from ourselves, we cannot despise others and be conceited. These gifts are given to the unworthy not the worthy, gifts cannot determine worth as they are all given by grace. Secondly, the word 'service' is the Greek word from which we get the word deacon/servant, 'diakonai'. What do you think Paul is trying to say by calling these spiritual gifts 'services'? This is the word that Christ uses to describe His own serving of us, Mark 10:45, 'For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' The third word 'activities' is literally 'energemata.' This can be translated as 'working' pointing to God's power and God's activity working in and through the believer, once again taking away the possibility of us taking credit for it. These gifts are given by grace for service and by His working, this is Paul's antidote to the self-absorbed views of the Corinthians.

The source of the gifts

An often overlooked aspect of these verses is the fact that they are a glorious affirmation of the Trinity. Read them again with this in mind, 'Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.' Many attack the Bible for teaching a weird three headed god, it does not, it teaches one God in three persons, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. You will notice that Spirit, for the Holy Spirit, Lord for the Lord Jesus Christ, and God for the Father are all mentioned in the single act of bestowing gifts upon the church. If you will allow me to dwell on the wonderful doctrine of the Trinity for a moment, what we have here is one of the key proof texts for the doctrine of inseparable operations. The Trinity is not only one in being but one in action, all the external works of the trinity are indivisible, are one. For example, think of creation, was it the action of the Father, or the Son or the Spirit, and the answer is Yes. Likewise here with the bestowing of the gifts, the Father, Son and Spirit are all active in giving spiritual gifts to the church. This interchangeable way in which Paul is able to talk about the work of the Father and Son and Spirit is not an indication of each doing a third of the action; nor is it a way of communicating modalism that God is one person who wears three masks reducing the persons from three to one. Paul is not confused but is revealing a great mystery that we adore. This means that all of God is working for us.

We should say a word here about our activity since it is the work of God through us. We cannot have a mechanical view of the gifts that does not recognize that we are walking before God and doing His will. It can happen that we can grow cold in our service, that we can become hypocrites that have hidden sins in our lives that serve with our gifts while our hearts are full of sin, our lives full of

hypocrisy and we are no longer walking in the fear of God. It is possible that God can bless your service, for example a preacher may see conversions, even though he has areas of sin in his life because God blesses the word despite the preacher. But the amount of damage we can do to our own souls to forget God while using His gifts like the Corinthians is a scary thing. Long term we can do terrible harm to God's name, the church and ourselves if we persist in using the gifts deceived about the sin in our lives because we have a measure of success and blessing in what we do. Paul is deliberately bringing the necessary perspective that these gifts are from God to impress upon us all the necessary outworkings that must follow. We must exercise the gifts like we conduct ourselves in prayer, humbly, pursuing holiness, seeking to submit to God's will, with a love and concern for others, ever mindful of God's glory. These are 'spiritual' gifts and so we must not grieve the Spirit in how we use them.

The purpose of the gifts

V7, 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.' V7 has been called a summary of the whole of chapter 12. The three main things Paul has been underlining in this section are here, as well as what he emphasizes in the rest of the chapter. Notice as he begins that every single Christian has at least one gift. This is an important point for the self-effacing. Many wrongly say that they are good for nothing, Paul is telling us that this is a denial of the definite work of God in our lives. We do not have to be the best at something for it to be a gift; we do not have to have as much success and blessing as others in order to have a gift. The assurance we can have is that God in His sovereignty has prepared good works for us to walk in, God has a life of service and love and holiness for each one of us, and where God has commanded there He provides and sustains and blesses. So many say of themselves, I am useless, if I do it I will break it, everyone else can do it but I cant. Paul puts a lie to this false and destructive humility, God has given you a gift, God will enable you to serve where He has gifted you, God will ensure that the gift He has given to fulfil His will is blessed to bring about the intended results He desires. What an encouragement.

What does Paul mean by 'the manifestation of the Spirit?' All the gifts; all the services; all the workings are Spirit wrought. Since Paul lists natural gifts with the supernatural the word manifestation is not meant as a power sign or external work of supernatural power exclusively as some suggest. It could mean one of two things, firstly, that the spiritual gifts are a proof of the Spirit among us, this would imply that one cannot take credit and must give glory to God and stop self-promoting. Or, secondly, it could mean that the power behind the various gifts is the Holy Spirit, this would direct the Corinthians away from themselves as the necessary ingredient to bring about success but make them acknowledge and look to God. The results are the same we are dependent not independent, we should be humble not proud, we should be prayerful not presumptuous, we should not grieve the Spirit by being loveless but keep in step with the Spirit, we should be yielding not stubborn, teachable not willful, etc.

'For the common good.' Why have the gifts been given, God pours out His grace upon you, making you a steward of His grace that through your service you would bring blessing to others. This is what Peter says, 1 Pet. 4:10, 'As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.' I find this to be one of the key reasons why every Christian should be a member of a local church. There are too many Christians who think that church

is optional. They can sit at home streaming a service, not entering into the life of the church, not serving and being served as Paul and Peter say we should do. God has made the Christian life interdependent. You can use your gift to earn a living as some do, you can use your gift to bring benefit to your family, your gifts can be used to benefit your community, but Paul has a strong push here for you using your gift in the church. As Paul emphasizes to the Ephesians, in 4:16, 'when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.'

This is a challenge for each one of us. In what way has God gifted you? In what way can you best use your gifts to serve others? What can you do in the church to serve others? Don't wait for the elders to invent a formal ministry for you to begin to serve each other, just do it. Not every gift is supposed to be used in the Sunday service, many of the gifts we have are functioning during the rest of the week. Paul emphasizes the gifts as grace-gifts, as services, and the Spirit at work among us, each of these emphases pushes us out of apathy and individualism into active service of others. Like Christ we are to serve, like Christ we are to give graciously, like Christ we are to seek another's good.