

Sermon 39: 1 Corinthians 12:8-11: The Variety of Gifts

OUTLINE

Wisdom
Knowledge
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Healing
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Distinguishing between spirits
Tongues and interpretation

INTRODUCTION

We come now to the first of Paul's lists of spiritual gifts. Here we begin to get into the specifics of defining some of the gifts. It is apparent that this list needs little introduction which likely indicates that the Corinthians were at least familiar with these gifts. You will notice that this list of 9 gifts includes 6 that relate to some form of spiritually gifted speech. You will also notice that Paul deliberately lists tongues and interpretation of tongues last in all three lists in this chapter, v10; v28; and v30. Once again we can see that this is not an exhaustive list but a sample list. All in aid of one of Paul's three main points. Paul has been stressing that gifts exist to serve others, this will be expanded upon later. He has been showing how every person has gifts and not only an imagined elite. The other main point Paul wants to make is that there is a variety of gifts; v8-11 serves to demonstrate this point.

In this sermon we will be taking the gifts listed here individually and expanding upon them. There are several questions that arise as soon as we approach a list like this. Firstly, are the gifts natural or supernatural gifts? One could understandably see all of these as supernatural, but there are also natural gifts of knowledge and wisdom for example that we must discuss. One usual way in which people have approached the gifts is to suggest that every gift as a supernatural and a natural version of the same gift. Although this is a helpful approach for some of the gifts it is not an approach that can be used with all of the gifts. For example, natural gifts of healing and miracles and faith seem to stretch credulity and go beyond what the intentions of Paul would be as he has written these lists. I will be looking at those gifts that can be viewed from this perspective but not all of them. A second question is, which of these gifted are permanent and which of these gifts are no longer active in the church. Depending on your view you would have different answers to this. For those with a Charismatic view, all the gifts are to be seen as continuing and to be desired. For those of a Cessationist perspective there will be certain revelatory gifts as well as offices and functions of those offices that do not continue. We will explore the question of Continuationism versus Cessationism when we get to chapter 13. Just to let you know I am a Cessationist. Thirdly, and you should be aware of this, I have not come across two commentators who agree exactly on what all of the definitions of the gifts are. We will make our best effort at establishing a biblical definition for each but please know that there are a variety of opinions out there.

Wisdom

V8, 'For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom.' Paul begins his list with wisdom. Now you will notice that he begins with 'for to one,' and then as he lists every other gift we have a repeated refrain, 'to another.' This is Paul's way of highlighting that the gifts are not given to a select group but are given to each and every Christian. All of this list is driving towards the point in v11, 'All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.'

As we come to consider wisdom you will notice the ESV says 'utterance of wisdom', the word utterance is logos/word. Paul has in mind someone who is speaking, most likely in the gathering of the church, and has a spiritual word of wisdom. Some have suggested that if tongues listed last indicates that they of least value and importance, the listing of wisdom and knowledge first might indicate their importance and their relation to the office of apostles and prophets. This is possible but we cannot nail it down for sure. The traditional distinction between wisdom and knowledge is that knowledge has to do with understanding and assimilating God's truth, but wisdom has to do with applying it. I think this is a good distinction. Where a word of knowledge might have to do with imparting certain truths, a word of wisdom likely has to do with teaching others how to live well in light of the truth. This biblical sort of wisdom which has to do with living out a holy fear of God should be distinguished from the Sophos/wisdom of the world which Paul has spoken against to the Corinthians in earlier chapters. We might think of a pastor who is applying God's word with skill showing how a particular truth can impact your life. How to overcome a particular sin; how to find contentment in your suffering; how to forgive someone who has sinned against you. A skillful application of truth to shape your life would qualify as a word of wisdom. But this gift would not be limited to Sunday sermons. A Christian counsellor might be skilled in applying God's word to knotty problems; a wise parent might be able to help a child who is struggling with a particular problem; a word in season from one friend encouraging another. Can the Spirit guide you to speak truth into another's life that is helpful? I believe He can.

Wisdom though is something that we can grow in as we mature and learn more from others and by our own experiences, often by our mistakes. Hopefully the older we get the wiser we get, though this is not guaranteed. Wisdom is also something that we are encouraged to pray for with the assurance that if we ask for it not being doubleminded, God will grant it, James 1:5, 'If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.' Some of us may have ministries around words of wisdom but hopefully every Christian will learn to give words of wisdom to others, older women instructing younger women; older men younger men; parents instructing their children, etc. If we are to desire gifts that edify others, here is one we should desire.

Knowledge

V8, 'and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit.' Is a word of knowledge something natural or supernatural? You could make a good argument from 1 Cor. 13:2 that knowledge seems to be part of the gift of prophecy, 'And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge.' Knowledge could be knowing unknowable things as Paul did because he was an apostle and had mysteries revealed to him Eph. 3:4-5, 'When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was

not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.' A word of knowledge then would be something unique to apostles and prophets as they revealed bible level revelation. Or it could be a different type of supernatural knowing like when Peter knew that Ananias and Sapphira were deceiving the church, Acts 5:1-6. Does Paul mean all supernatural types of knowing, or only supernatural knowing related to preaching at church? On top of that there does seem to be a place for discussing natural knowledge like 'idols are nothing' 1 Cor. 8:4. This would mean that a word of knowledge could include a teacher who is skilled in knowledge skillfully imparting that knowledge to others. The difficulty here is that there is a god argument for all of these. And to confuse matters more 1 Cor. 14:6 lists them all together, 'Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?' I am a Cessationist who does not believe that God is using the revelatory gifts to give new revelation to the church, so I tend to go with knowledge as a part of a teaching gifts, while being open to God from time to time giving someone knowledge about something they could not have known about, but that would not be related to any office, any ministry, it would not be giving any new truth in addition to the Bible, it would not be normative for the church, and as a pastor I would not allow it to bind the congregation like a prophecy.

So let me focus on knowledge as part of teaching. Like wisdom there will be those who are naturally wired for knowledge, and like wisdom this is an area that we can all grow in. There will be those who are naturals at assimilating data, comparing views, have brains that naturally set out a taxonomy of views, who can arrange that information in a way that is accessible and easy to communicate to others. There are probably some systematic theologians that we could think of that fit these criteria, but we should not only think of those who are maximally gifted in this area. A word of knowledge then would be an ability to impart this information in a way that helps others. As with wisdom we can apply ourselves to gaining more of it and dispensing it to others. When it comes to these natural aspects of the gifts, we do need to remember as well that God blesses our use of the gifts, if we are faithful with little God will increase our cup size, and as we are faithful still we will see progress and growth. An outlet in service is the usual way we grow in the Christian life.

Faith

V9, 'to another faith by the same Spirit'. We now come to three miraculous gifts that are all non-word gifts wedged between all the other speaking gifts. It is possible that faith is related to miracles and healing because they are so often associated with them in the NT. In 1 Cor. 13:2 Paul says, 'and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.' Paul is referring to the teaching of Jesus in Mark 11:23-24, 'Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. ²⁴ Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.' Paul is of course not talking about the faith necessary for salvation, though this is a gift of God too Eph. 2:8-9, but an enabled ability to trust in God for some extraordinary result. James 5:14-15, as does Jesus, links this with praying for healing, 'Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the one who is

sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.' This has led to many thinking of George Mueller and Hudson Taylor as they sustained big ministries by prayer that they had this gift.

This leads to some interesting questions. If this is a spiritual gift is it only something that can occur when granted or can one grow one's faith by studying the word of God to trust for certain things in prayer. We cannot deny that the more we study the Bible and know God's will the greater our confidence will be for knowing and praying and expecting God's will. But on the other hand we should not pretend that every Christian with enough time to rise to the place where every prayer is answered as it is prayed. There is some truth to the fact that we can grow in confidence and expect more answers to prayer, but we cannot like the Word of Faith movement turn this into a guaranteed formula. God is sovereign and He answers prayer according to His will.

Gifts of healings

V9, 'to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit.' You will notice that Paul speaks in the plural of gifts of healing. Does this mean the gifts of Jesus; the apostles; and other disciples? Does this mean that there is a separate gift of healing for different diseases, so one person will have the gift of healing cancer and another the gift for healing blindness? Or does this mean that the gift is temporary and not permanent, in other words one cannot claim to have a ministry of healing as it is ad hoc? It is unlikely that it means that one has the gift of natural healings like a doctor and another supernatural healings. There are several layers to this gift. Firstly, there are the healing gifts that Christ performed as the Messiah where the healings are signs peculiar for the purpose of ratifying His identity. The number of healings Christ performed should be viewed as peculiar to Him. Secondly, we know that there is something called the signs of the apostles, that relate distinctly to authenticating the message of the original apostles with signs and wonders. We should not expect to see healings in this fashion. Peter and Paul in Acts saw shadows and handkerchiefs healing the sick, we must recognize a difference between what God was doing through the apostles and ourselves. I do believe that God does answer prayers for healing and see James 5:14-15 quoted earlier as showing the regular use of praying for the healing in the context of the local church to be normative. So let me reiterate what those verses say. If you are sick, please, call for the elders we would love to come and pray for you trusting that God might will a healing in your case. But we would also have to say that God is sovereign and may choose to answer no because He has other purposes in your situation.

It is worthwhile stressing here that the teaching, that I once held and is widely taught in charismatic circles that Jesus died not only for the forgiveness of our sins but also for the healing of our diseases is an error. There is a teaching that claims to be teaching a full atonement where we need to exercise faith not only for forgiveness but for healing as well. The claim that is that Jesus died not only for the forgiveness of our sins but that He also died for the healing of all of our diseases. This view is taught from Is. 53:5, '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.' However this is a metaphorical use of the idea of being healed, we can see this as Peter in 1 Pet. 2:24 quotes this in support of sins being forgiven using it in a figurative way to describe our salvation from the guilt of sin.

Miracles

V10, 'to another the working of miracles.' Paul again uses that word working/energizement indicating the source of these miracles is the Spirit. Miracles would generally be described as a non-natural supernatural work of God, something that is done immediately like and not mediated through a natural process. In the ministry of Christ these non-speaking related, non-healing related miracles include turning water into wine; feeding the 5000; walking on water; disappearing before the crowds who sought to seize Him, and some add the casting out of demons. Does God still do miracles today? Would the appearance of angels to Muslims qualify as a modern day miracle? My answer is yes but not necessarily in the same way. We have already stated how the ministry of Christ and the ministry of the apostles is unique, we should not expect a regular, message and identity attesting ministry of miracles. We are in a different place in church history and God is working out different things at this time. That said we believe in a supernatural God who can intervene in nature to send angels, to miraculously rescue or save someone, to cause supernatural weather events, and I would say that Christians if they have the opportunity still have the authority to cast out demons. Many Cessationists would talk about extraordinary works of providence in order to stress they are miraculous but also to show that they are now acts in keeping with God's governing activity and not associated with a major redemptive historical event like sending the Messiah or establishing the church. Generally if you come to me and ask, could God still I would generally talk about this subject.

Prophecy

V10, 'to another prophecy.' We return now to the speaking gifts and we have prophecy and the testing of prophecy; tongues and the interpretation of tongues. What is prophecy? You have a broad and a narrow definition. There are those like myself who have a narrow view of prophecy that see it as a direct revelation of God, others think that 1 Cor. 14:3 gives a broader definition, 'On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.' This has led some to say that prophecy includes foretelling the future; but that it can also include forthtelling like when the OT prophets spoke to Israel about their lawbreaking and need for repentance; or about God's mercy and willingness to forgive if they repented. In light of this some have stressed that the office of prophet and foretelling has discontinued, but preaching/forthtelling is to be seen as an ongoing form of prophecy. I appreciate that this gives the preached word of God a high view and it was the view of the Puritans, but I do not think that this is what Paul had in mind when he spoke about prophecy. There are others like Wayne Grudem who tries to make an argument for two types of prophecy, the high grade type given by those who hold the office of prophet which is on a par with scripture and must be obeyed. And then there is the lower tier prophecy which can err and therefore must be tested. Some claim we can all prophecy in this way. Grudem has been soundly answered and shown to be in error, we will take prophecy to be an authoritative revelation of God for the church.

Prophets along with apostles form the foundation of the NT church, speak in authoritative mysteries, and are no longer an office active in the church. I am a revelatory cessationist and do not admit prophecy of this nature any more. Can someone have something supernaturally revealed that they did not know before, sure God still moves in power, but I do not call this prophecy.

Distinguishing between spirits

V10, 'to another the ability to distinguish between spirits.' This is one of those gifts that has supernatural and natural examples of it. Firstly we see in places like Acts 16:16-17 that Paul has a super natural ability to discern demonic activity and motives, 'As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." Paul finally cast the demon out of the girl not wanting the good advertising from a bad source. But we also see the universal call for all Christians to test the spirits, 1 John 4:1, 'Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.' I have seen this gift deeply abused as those of the spiritual warfare camp claim inside knowledge to the names of principalities over an area that they then bind by name so that the gospel can go forward with power. Or I have seen some Christians claim that they can sense which demons are possessing other Christians and cast them out. This gift has to do primarily with testing the message that is preached. Is the message true or false, of God or of the flesh or the devil. I suspect that in the days before the Bible was completed there may have been a more supernatural mode to this gift, but now that we have the Bible we can test all things by the word of God. There will be those who are analytical and discerning naturally, and then there are the rest of us who can learn to be more discerning with age. This is a good gift for leaders to have as they have to protect the flock from error. You want your leaders to have a measure of this analytical skill. This gift can come with baggage as those who are more analytical can also tend to be more critical. Those who have a bent for testing all things need to steer clear of being constantly combative, critical and full of their own opinions, feeling that the sharing of their thoughts on everything is an entitlement.

Tongues and interpretation

V10, 'to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.' Being the central gift of controversy in Corinth I will need to deal with these in a little more detail so I will hold off on commenting on them here except to say that tongues were actual languages, that all did not have the gift, and the modern practice of the charismatic church where everyone can speak in a gibberish as a sign of receiving the Holy Spirit is unbiblical.

V11, 'All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.' Having given a sample list Paul draws us to some key conclusions. All of these gifts, whether they are prominent or not, whether they are of the highest importance or not are all given by the Spirit and are therefore not to be despised. We cannot despise the gifts of the Spirit in others, or in ourselves, they are of God. Paul emphasizes how it is the Spirit who has apportioned these gifts, He has sovereignly willed the distribution. This means you cannot complain about what gifts you have; this means you cannot envy or despise the gifts of others; this means submitting with contentment to obeying the Lord's will in accordance with the gifts you have been given. Paul emphasizes how all the gifts are given, they are from the Spirit and not of ourselves, this means we must stop being proud and stop taking credit, and stop promoting ourselves as if we are made more important than others by gifts that

we cannot take credit for. Paul once again emphasizes how each one has gifts, each one has the Spirit each one is ministered to by God and used by God.