

Lesson: Building Up the Body: The Role of Spiritual Gifts

Lesson Overview

Biblical Passage

1 Corinthians 12:4-11

Supporting Passages

Romans 12:6-8, 1 Peter 4:10, Ephesians 4:7-11

Memory Verse

1 Corinthians 12:11

Biblical Truth

The Holy Spirit gives believers spiritual gifts to work in unity so that God can accomplish His purposes through them.

Context

In addition to other problems that were plaguing the church at Corinth, Paul confronted the disorderly and arrogant way in which the Corinthians were dealing with spiritual gifts. Though it does not seem that Paul intended the list to be exhaustive, he identified nine specific spiritual gifts for the Corinthians. Paul stressed that spiritual gifts were gifts from the Holy Spirit to be used to promote the common good of the Body and not to be used for personal gain.

Commentary

Investigation

The topic of spiritual gifts can create heated discussion among Christians. It was true in Paul's day as well. Why? While there are many reasons, perhaps the main one is because the gifts come from God. Thus, like many other things related to God, we can't understand everything about them. Nor will we necessarily have the same perspective on them.

The Corinthian church seems to have been in need of an adjustment of perspective. There were rifts in the church. There was quarreling. There was infighting. It was a volatile church in a volatile city. But there also was a real tangible moving of the Spirit. Paul addressed the different spiritual gifts as a way of offering some discernment between what was of God and what was not.

There have been problems regarding the exercise of certain gifts throughout Church history. God's intention was not to cause problems. Ultimately, He gives us gifts to bring glory to Himself. This lesson examines what spiritual gifts are and how God intends them to be used. As we use the gifts that God gave us, we will accomplish His purposes and bring glory to Him.

Importance

This lesson deals with the Essential Truth that [The Holy Spirit is God and Empowerer]. The Holy Spirit is supernatural and sovereign, baptizing all believers into the Body of Christ. Beginning at the moment of salvation, He lives within every Christian, empowering him or her for effective service. The Holy Spirit convicts individuals of sin, uses God's Word to mature believers into the likeness of Christ, and secures them until Christ returns. The Holy Spirit is also the agent by which we are given and empowered to use our spiritual gifts. As this lesson demonstrates, these gifts are to be used for the unification of the Church.

This lesson also teaches the Essential Truth that [The Church is God's Plan].

Interpretation

1 Corinthians 12:4-6 It appears that some believers in [Corinth] felt that they were more elite because they had received a certain spiritual gift. They looked down on fellow believers whose gifts weren't as spectacular. Thus the Corinthian church was greatly divided over the issue of spiritual gifts. This was not God's intention, so Paul wrote to correct their thinking.

The common theme in these verses is unity in the midst of diversity. [Paul's] words in 1 Corinthians 12 (and also in Rom. 12 and Eph. 4) emphasize how God uses differences to develop the Church rather than to destroy it. Three times in these verses, Paul used the words "different . . . but the same." He wanted the Corinthians to understand that differences should not cause division. He noted how variety can bring vitality in the Church. Ultimately, he wanted his readers to see that all gifts are from God; thus they are all important.

The words [gifts], *service*, and [working] basically have the same meaning. They are alternate ways of describing what God has given. The word *gifts* is a reminder of the price—they are freely given by God to His people. The word *service* is a

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reminder of the purpose—they are given to help others. The word *working* is a reminder of the power—God’s unlimited energy makes them all effective.

Note that Paul also emphasized the common source of the gifts. He pointed to the Trinity when he mentioned the “Spirit,” “Lord,” and “God.” This is the three-in-one God: Spirit, Son, and Father (2 Cor. 13:14, Eph. 4:4-6). All three persons of the Trinity are responsible for giving gifts to God’s people for God’s glory.

Above all, Paul wanted his hearers to know that the variety of gifts came from God and were empowered by Him. Thus there should be no division among His people who had received these special gifts.

1 Corinthians 12:7 Paul emphasized that every believer (“each one”) has been given a spiritual gift. No Christian is excluded from God’s generosity. Thus, every gift is a “[manifestation] of the Spirit,” or an indication of His indwelling and work in every believer. This means that the Spirit of God expresses Himself through each gift.

Paul also noted that God’s gifts are given “for the common good.” Though God gives individual believers a gift, He planned for the variety of gifts to benefit everyone in the Church. Later in this chapter, Paul would note how different parts work together in the human body. The parts can’t exist apart from each other, and the body won’t function properly if the parts don’t work for the good of the whole. This is the same way in which God designed the Church. He planned it so that different believers with different gifts can work together for the good of the whole. There is no room for us to think that a certain spiritual gift indicates a higher status in God’s family. God didn’t give the gifts to recognize or honor certain believers but to build up His Church (Eph. 4:12).

1 Corinthians 12:8-10 These verses introduce several of the gifts from the Spirit. Obviously, this is not an exhaustive list because other specific gifts are mentioned elsewhere (Rom. 12:6-8, 1 Cor. 12:28-30, Eph. 4:11, 1 Pet. 4:10). The gifts that Paul mentioned were probably noted because of the situation in Corinth.

Paul first mentioned two gifts related to intelligent speech. This speech relates to “wisdom” and “knowledge” that comes from God’s Spirit. Many scholars believe that these could refer to the same thing. Others, however, see wisdom as referring to intelligence and its practical application, while knowledge refers to insight and understanding. In either case, the focus of these gifts is the ability to communicate what comes from God, not merely wisdom and knowledge.

Another gift mentioned is faith. This does not refer to saving faith, in which people place their trust in Christ to receive eternal life. Every believer has this type of faith. But the person with the spiritual gift of faith is able to do powerful things. The gift of faith is an incredible trust in God to work in a particular situation and is the willingness to step out in faith even in what seems like an impossible situation. This is the type of faith that Jesus said could move mountains (Matt. 17:20).

Further, the Spirit also gives some believers “gifts of healing.” This was evident in some of the apostles in the book of Acts. It goes beyond ordinary medical attention and impacts people with a variety of illnesses. This is a way that God works through certain people to bring both physical and mental health.

While gifts of healing are miraculous, the gift of “[miraculous powers]” goes beyond just healing. It covers a variety of actions that are unexplainable and can only be the work of God. Jesus exhibited miraculous powers when He fed the 5,000 (Mark 6:34-44), calmed the storm (Mark 4:35-41), and drove out demons (Mark 5:1-20). Paul also exhibited miraculous powers when he caused a sorcerer to go blind (Acts 13:8-11) and when he brought a young man back to life (Acts 20:7-12). Jesus promised that those who have faith in Him will do “even greater things” than the miracles that He had been doing (John 14:12).

Another of the Spirit’s gifts is prophecy. The focus of prophecy is on sharing God’s message (rather than telling the future). Thus, it is “inspired speech” (Morris, 1985). Before the New Testament was written and compiled, prophets in the Church (Eph. 4:11) announced and explained God’s message in different situations. Even today, those with the gift of prophecy have a special ability to help others discover God’s will in a particular situation. Paul noted that the gift of prophecy is helpful for evangelizing nonbelievers (1 Cor. 14:24-25) and encouraging believers (1 Cor. 14:3).

Related to prophecy is the gift of “distinguishing between spirits.” There have always been many false prophets seeking to lead astray immature believers (Matt. 7:15, 1 John 4:1). Thus in Paul’s day there was a need for those persons with special discernment who could determine if a message had come from God or from somewhere else (such as Satan). There is still a great need for those who can discern whether certain persons who claim to speak for God actually have a message from Him. In addition, believers with this gift help guard believers against religious fakes who claim to be acting for God or in His power.

The last two gifts that Paul mentioned in this section relate to speaking in and interpreting “different kinds of tongues.” Perhaps no other gift has caused such controversy, either in the ancient Church or in our own time. Paul devoted much of 1 Corinthians 14 to the gift of tongues and gave it a lower priority than the gift of prophecy. It appears that this does not refer

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to speaking in other known languages (as in Acts 2:4). Instead, it refers to an "ecstatic utterance" in which neither the speaker nor the hearers understand what is spoken (Vincent, 1985). The words are "mysteries" directed "to God" (1 Cor. 14:2). The person with this gift must "keep quiet" (1 Cor. 14:28) if there is no one present in the church meeting who can interpret what is being expressed. It is not an uncontrollable gift.

1 Corinthians 12:11 This verse is a summary of Paul's teaching about the gifts. He emphasized again that "all" the gifts come from God's Spirit. While we should "eagerly desire the greater gifts" (1 Cor. 12:31), the Spirit alone "determines" what gift to give to "each" believer. This is a reminder that all believers receive a gift from the Spirit. And each gift is an expression of His "work" in the believer's life.

Implications

Every believer has a spiritual gift. This means that everyone in God's family has been given a special ability. The Christian who says, "I can't do anything for God," has not recognized the gift(s) that God has given to him or her. But it's also important to remember that spiritual gifts are given to benefit the Church, not individual believers. God designed His Church so that every person has something to do. No one has all the gifts; we are dependent on other believers to accomplish God's mission. Because [The Holy Spirit is God and Empowerer], He distributes the spiritual gifts to believers as He sees fit. When the individuals in a church or fellowship utilize their gifts in tandem with others, the gospel is proclaimed, new believers are added to the Church, and the body is strengthened.

Have you ever given someone a gift and discovered later that he or she gave it away or packed it away in an attic? Even if the gift is the wrong size or isn't needed, it's discouraging when the recipient doesn't use it. How do you think God feels when His people don't use His gifts? Because God knows us inside and out, the gifts that He gives us are never the wrong size or style. His gifts are perfect for us. Therefore, God expects believers to use their gifts to serve Him. Seekers may want to serve God but struggle to find their place of service. When they understand how the spiritual gifts they have received work with other gifts, they will find that "sweet spot" in ministry. As Owners and Servants gain confidence in using their gifts, they may begin to value their gifts more than others or use the gifts to gain attention for themselves instead of bringing glory to God. Shepherds can help members of both groups understand and properly use their gifts to strengthen the Kingdom of God.

- **How does this passage connect spiritual gifts to God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit?**
- **Which spiritual gift(s) has the Spirit given to you?**
- **Who should receive the benefits of your spiritual gift(s)?**
- **How can your gift(s) be used in the ministries of your church?**

How can your gift(s) be used to demonstrate Christ's love to others?