Spiritual Gifts in Biblical Perspective

“Understanding Spiritual Gifts and Their Proper Use”

I Corinthians 12

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 I want to give you a few thoughts on spiritual gifts from I Corinthians 12. This will be a Biblical exposition of some of the salient points concerning spiritual gifts in the body of Christ. When you study the book of I Corinthians the first couple of chapters are introductory in terms of basic relationships, Paul’s pastoral purpose and his commentary to this church he spent 18 months with. Then the epistle addresses seven questions and they can be spotted by the grammatical framing of them when Paul starts with the phrase, ‘Now concerning (this)…’ So when you see that phrase Paul is answering a question that had been sent to him from the church at Corinth. One of the questions was about spiritual gifts.

 I Corinthians 12:1–3 says *[1] Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. [2]You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. [3]Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit*.

 The first thing Paul is telling us here is that spiritual gifts need to be understood from the framework of God’s Word, not the framework of personal experience. In fact, that’s a general principle I would like to lay before you for life. Do not build your theology for life from your experiences in life. Build your theology for life from the Word of God whereby you interpret your experiences in life. If you build your life based upon experiences then you have opened yourself wide for Satan to lead you astray. Satan has multiple ways to lead you astray.

 In fact, the Apostle Paul will say to the church at Thessalonia that in the last days there will be a general apostasy because people would become susceptible to Satan’s false teachings because they were consumed with signs, wonders and miracles. Satan would do false signs, wonders and miracles with power and that would lead them astray but then Paul said ‘not the elect of God.’ The elect of God would not be led astray because they had received the knowledge of the truth. What keeps them focused on Christ and led astray by false doctrine is they were searching the Word of God to know the God of the Word and the majesty and preeminence of Christ.

 When you build your life on experience then Satan can lead you astray to idolatry in various ways. So you don’t want to be led astray but be led by Christ to Christ and that only happens with His Word. His Word alone is the foundation and capstone of our life. So Paul tells them when it comes to spiritual gifts he wants them to understand what the Spirit of God is doing.

 So if you hear anyone blaspheme or demean the name of Christ then you know the Spirit of God does not work. Why? Jesus told the Disciples in Acts 1 He wanted them to bear witness of Him and they would do that be receiving power by the Holy Spirit. He is saying two things here. One is you cannot be Christ-centered and Christ-exalting without the Spirit of God. Two, if you have the Spirit of God you can’t help but be Christ-centered and Christ-exalting because the Spirit of God did not come to bring attention to Himself or even attention to His spiritual gifts. Everything the Spirit accomplishes is always for the preeminence of Christ. It’s not for the preeminence of the Holy Spirit or the work of the Holy Spirit. It is for the preeminence of the fruit of the Holy Spirit which is a powerful witness of Christ.

 So if the Spirit of God is working in a church with spiritual gifts then Jesus will not be demeaned but Jesus will be exalted for *no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 12:3b)*. That is important because in the days of Corinth and the Apostle Paul where the church was it was under the rule of an empire. That empire was Rome. Perhaps you have seen the newsreel when Adolph Hitler would come into a crowd and how everyone would snap to attention, the Nazi salute would be given and the incantation of the leader would take place. Rome is the same way.

 As soon as you met someone the greeting for a Roman was this; ‘Caesar is lord’ and by that they meant deity and supremacy. The believers began to die for Christ in Rome because they would not say ‘Caesar is lord.’ They would only say ‘Jesus is Lord.’ As His Word says, no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit. It wasn’t that one day you came to your senses and said ‘Jesus is Lord.’ It was one day that the Holy Spirit brought you to your senses and you said ‘Jesus is Lord.’

 So here having established the supremacy of the Word and the preeminence of Christ, Paul is now ready to take on the matter of spiritual gifts. Let’s look further in I Corinthians 12. I won’t be able to go in depth with this but I am just going to give you some basic distillations about spiritual gifts. As a side note I currently use the ESV translation in my studies but in some cases I will revert back to the NAS because I believe it is an unbelievably accurate translation and this paragraph is one that I use the NAS on because I believe it is a better translation of this paragraph.

 I Corinthians 12:4–11 says *[4]Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. [5]And there are varieties of ministries (service), and the same Lord. [6]There are varieties of effects (activities), but the same God who works all things in all persons. [7]But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. [8]For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; [9]to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, [10]and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. [11]But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills*.

 Spiritual gifts, just like everything else in your life must be viewed from a Trinitarian framework. Creation is an act of the Trinity – the Father authored creation, everything was created through the Son and for the Son, and the Spirit of God hovered over the creation in its primordial act bringing order to it. Redemption, salvation is Trinitarian.

 Ephesians 1:3–6 says *[3]Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, [4]even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love [5]he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, [6]to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.*

Here we see the Father has authored our salvation to the praise of His glorious grace. Ephesians 1:7–11 declare that the Son of God has accomplished our salvation to the praise of His glorious grace. Then Ephesians 1:12–14 declared that the Spirit of God has applied that salvation and sealed you into Christ to the praise of His glorious grace.

In the doctrine of Providence God has declared a promise for the Father has promised that all things work together for good. He accomplishes that through the present now intercession of Christ who ever lives to pray for you and then the work of His Providence is the Holy Spirit at work in your life and in the body of Christ. Whether its creation, redemption or providence all of life is Trinitarian. The Gospel is a Trinitarian Gospel. God dwells as One God in Three Persons and spiritual gifts are to be understood from a Trinitarian framework.

The Father has ordained the effects of your ministry of your gifts. The Son has established the ministries for your gifts and the Holy Spirit is the One who has gifted you. You have the manifestation of the Spirit. The reason you have a spiritual gift is because the Holy Spirit is taking who you are and what He is doing by the design of Christ to the glory of the Father, for the Holy Spirit has gifted you to fit into a ministry for the preeminence of Christ to accomplish an effect that is ordained of the Father. So you are to see your spiritual gifts, their presence and their ministry in a Trinitarian framework.

There is a law that God has established called the law of causality. I hear people say this wrongly and when they do they are opening themselves up in terms of how to defend the faith and they are kind of giving an opening they shouldn’t give. People will say for everything there is a cause and that’s not true. It’s kind of like the statement power corrupts, absolute power corrupts and that’s not true. The one case about absolute power is when we hear ‘I am El-Shaddai’ which means God Almighty where all power is in God. Any power that any one has in their life no matter who it is, has been designated to them by God because all power is with God. Now is God corruptible? No, so sometimes there are things that are said that we don’t really think through and we get trapped in a world and life view that is really unbiblical.

So it is not true that for everything there is a cause for there is Someone called God and He is the uncaused One and the One who causes all things. The effects of spiritual gifts, like any other effects, exist because God exists. It is of Him, from Him and unto Him therefore to Him the presence ought to be devoted for His glory. So what would be more appropriate is to say, not for ‘everything’ there is a cause but for every effect there is a cause.

Sometimes there are secondary causes. God accomplishes things that is the primary cause and He’ll be able to accomplish things through your spiritual gifts. And you become the secondary cause because the primary cause has equipped you by the Spirit to do a ministry for the Son in the body of Christ for His glory and all of it has been declared by God for His glory. You need to understand that if you’re not using your spiritual gifts this is sacred treason. God has given you this gift for an effect and that effect ought to be seen in a ministry. God the Father has ordained the effect of your gift, given by the Spirit, to be ministered in the preeminence of Christ. So why would we not use it as good stewards of what He has given to us?

Another reason I want you to understand how important this is, is because your spiritual gift is there for a purpose. God has an effect for it. It may not be the same effect He has for someone else’s gift but it’s a crucial and necessary effect. Your life for Christ with your spiritual gifts matter. There are no small people, small gifts. They have all been given for an effect through the Spirit to the preeminence of Christ. So you have a purpose that God has ordained to be accomplished through you.

Now if you have the gift to praise God and you don’t do it then God can raise up stones to give praise to Him. God’s arm is not going to be shortened if you don’t use the gift He has given you. I remember a time when I was away for a conference and had secured a missionary to speak in my place on missions at church but he had not sent in his title for his sermon. I had already left and one of the elders wrote me that this missionary’s sermon didn’t sit well with him because they had just gotten his title. The title was ‘Five Things God Can’t Do.’ I said ‘Praise the Lord you have been listening.’ There is only one thing God can’t do and that is God can’t quit being God. He is eternal, immutable, impassable, unchangeable, forever and He is always faithful. If we don’t do what God has ordained for us to do then God will get it done as God desires to get it done for His glory.

Even if we neglect what He has called us to do or even labor against Him, He will still accomplish His purposes. If you want a big life you have to get a big God. Our God is relentlessly unstoppable to secure His glory. That is the ultimate effect of your spiritual gift when you use it in the Kingdom for the preeminence of Christ.

 Next I want to look specifically at I Corinthians 12:7 which says *[7]But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* There are some who say they want to find out their gift for personal fulfillment. No, you do not have a spiritual gift for personal fulfillment. Let me further complicate this. Do you get personally fulfilled when you use your spiritual gift? Probably but you don’t get a spiritual gift for personal fulfillment. You get the spiritual gift for the common good.

We of course, rightly say, you can’t come to Christ in a group plan. You have to make a personal commitment to Christ. There is a holy God and we are sinners. We are dead in our sins and we cannot save ourselves and no man-made religion or resolution can save us. We need to be saved by God’s grace for His glory and God has sent His Son to be that Savior who now offers to all of humanity the free gift of eternal life. I pray you will come to Him because no one else can come to Him for you. The gate is narrow, only one fits through at a time, but sometimes knowing that salvation is personal we think the Christian life is personal.

The Christian life is not personal for you are members of the body of Christ. You are not made to live isolated or independent. You are made to live in an interdependent relationship with God’s people and together fully dependent upon the grace of God and desiring the glory of God. Even your spiritual gift was given to your personally but not for personal fulfillment, but for the common good. God has you gifted so that the body can function well.

I have used this illustration before of a man who had no legs. This man found a way to walk on his arms with blocks of wood for I watched him do it as a boy growing up when I would pass him going to the movies. But how much better would he have walked if he had had legs? In the body of Christ, legs need to show up. The legs need to be cultivated and encouraged to serve the Lord with confidence that God has you there for the common good so that the body of Christ can proclaim the Message and accomplish its mission to the glory of God. And you have a gift that is absolutely essential.

This does come from Ezekiel which reminds me of the song based on that book where the foot bones connected to the ankle bones and the ankle bone is connected to the shin bone and the shin bone is connected to the knee bone, etc. We are connected to one another. God has designed it that way and the effect is glorious. So let’s connect. Let’s enter into these interdependent relationships where our gift is there for the common good. Our gift is not there for everybody else on the team where we serve to bow down to our gift. Our gift is there to interdependently work with the other gifts in the body of Christ so that the body of Christ can serve the Lord effectively. But we say ‘no’ to lone ranger Christianity. Let’s move to the rest of the paragraph.

I Corinthians 12:8–11 says *[8]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. [11]All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills*.

I want to bring out two distillations from these verses. The first one is the church at Corinth has enjoyed the ministry of Apostles so because this was still the age of the Apostles and the age of revelation then many of the extraordinary gifts that were signs and wonders that credentialed an Apostle as an agent of revelation, had been present. Those spiritual gifts were germane to the Apostolic ministry of completing the Scripture and once the Apostles had done their job of completing the Scriptures then the office of Apostles has gone and the credential gifts of being able to signs, wonders and miracles has gone with it.

I did not say that God has ceased doing miracles. I did say that the ability to do them through the laying on of hands that was germane to identifying an agent of revelation, an Apostle, was done when the Apostolic ministry was finished and the Word of God was given, so we don’t need those gifts of the infancy of the church. In other words, the extraordinary gifts that belong to the Apostles and all revelatory gifts have ceased. Why? It is because we have their product – the Word of God. The last author wrote in Revelation 22:18–19, *[18]I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, [19]and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book*.

At least from this pulpit you will never hear anyone say ‘you don’t need to open up your Bibles for I have a word from the Lord.’ No, we have the Word of the Lord from the Lord and anything from this pulpit is to be an act of illumination of God’s revelation that He has given to us, not another act of revelation. That has been completed.

Secondly, I want you to see the statement made in verse 11 that says *[11]All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills*. So whatever gift the Holy Spirit has given you to be in a ministry for Christ for the effect that the Father has ordained, He designed it sovereignly just for you. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit has given you your spiritual gift and has designed it for you.

It is abundantly clear from this text and others in the Bible that your spiritual gift is not static. In other words, you don’t get a spiritual gift that just remains static your whole life. One, the Bible calls you to stir up your gift (II Timothy 1:6) to mature it, perfect it and work on it. When I go on my annual three week sabbatical I give the elders my objectives during that time and all those objectives to some degree or another are there for me to attempt by God’s grace to grow in the use of the spiritual gift that has been given to me. I want it to keep growing and not just during those three weeks out of every year. Every day I want to ask the Lord ‘Help me be a learner, a grower and perfect what You have given to me.’ As you seek to be perfected you will find your gift is not static, it’s dynamic and it’s developing.

I like to use the illustration of a snowflake to communicate this the best to you. Each snowflake although they all look like a snowflake, they are utterly unique. Yet in the trip from the cloud to the earth the configuration of that snowflake is going to change multiple times. In the course of your life your spiritual gift is unique and it will configure itself in various ways. It will be matured and be dynamically perfected as it works in life, even in changes of ministry places. Philip started out as a deacon and ended up as an evangelistic preacher. Stephen started out as a deacon and ended up as preacher. It is amazing how the Lord might configure your gift and develop it throughout the years as you seek to mature it.

So how can you get started in using your spiritual gift? We are currently developing material that will be available on how to discover, use, develop and deploy your spiritual gift, but you don’t have to wait for that. You can contact Ray Tucker here at Briarwood right now to ask him about the material and you can meet with him if you so desire. There are all kinds of ministries for Christ that are already here and there are places for you to get involved. Why is that important?

If God has effects for you He has laid those effects upon your heart. The old term for that was calling. The new term is passion. God has given you a passion for something and the best way to find out your gift is to begin to move toward your passion. Your passion may be worship or evangelism. We all worship, evangelize, disciple and pray but your passion may be to focus in one of those areas. As you get started you will begin to find out the peculiarities, idiosyncrasies and specificities of your spiritual gift. In other words, I’m telling you to just get started and let people give you feedback. Start moving forward.

If a car is sitting still in the driveway it’s hard to change its direction but once it starts moving it’s a lot easier to turn the wheels. Something that is moving is always easier to re-direct where it ought to be than one sitting still. So start moving forward and using your gifts so you can find out. At Briarwood we say to our ministries to make places for people to get involved where they don’t have to sign up for the next 25 years. This way they can find out over a period of time what their passion/gifts are and they can begin to use it. We’ll find a way to get you started where you don’t have to commit to something for a long period of time. This way you can find out if you have the gift of teaching, service, leadership, hospitality, etc. The Holy Spirit has gifted you so use it.

My final comment is, say ‘no’ to pride and arrogance and this is how you do that. One, is that you didn’t come up with your spiritual gift for the Holy Spirit gave it to you for the effect that the Father has ordained in a ministry that Christ has established. Secondly, your spiritual gift is there for the common good, not for your self-absorption and self-exaltation. The rest of I Corinthians 12 is devoted to the third thing I’m going to give you but I don’t have time to go through in the rest of this study. Thirdly, nobody has a gift where you can say to the rest of the body ‘I don’t need you.’ We need each other. Everybody doesn’t exist to bow down to our spiritual gift in ministry but we need them and praise God they need us.

Here is the emphasis. I Corinthians 12:14–20 says *[14]For the body does not consist of one member but of many. [15]If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. [16]And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. [17]If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? [18]But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. [19]If all were a single member, where would the body be? [20]As it is, there are many parts yet one body*.

There is something there in the symmetry and the design of how we all are a part and play a part in the body of Christ. It tells me that there is no room for my pride and arrogance for I fit in the hole. Secondly, don’t be jealous and envious of the more visible gifts because it’s usually the invisible ones that are the most important in the body. Some of you have beautiful hair and if you lose it, it will be okay for I know that by experience. There is not a health hazard unless it’s falling out in your food. You will be okay but if your liver, kidneys or heart falls out you are in trouble. Those things are invisible and we very seldom think about them. So don’t be jealous and envious of the more visible. Realize that everyone has that place, that calling designed by God sovereignly to use for His glory. So there is no room for pride, arrogance, jealous or envy but there’s a lot of room for this glorious effect of the body of Christ living to the glory of the Father for our ministries to be to the preeminence of Christ done by all of God’s people whom each one has a spiritual gift designed to be developed and deployed. Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You so much for the time in Your Word for this study. Bless my brothers and sisters who are reading this and bless us as a congregation as we seek a lifestyle of evangelism and discipleship in the preeminence of Christ for the glory of the Father for the proclamation of the Gospel as the body of Christ acting interdependently in concert with utter devotion to the glory of our Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I pray this in Jesus’ Name, Amen.