

Women's Bible Study – Autumn Ridge Church
Unity in Giftedness – 1 Corinthians 12
March 22, 2017 – Svea Merry



Our chapter for today covers a really fun topic: Spiritual gifts. Now, “spiritual gifts” is one of those terms that probably rolls off your tongue if you've grown up in the church. Without even thinking how it sounds you might tell someone, “My top gift is helps.” If you didn't grow up in the church, you're reaction to that probably is something like, “Lady, I don't what you just said, but I do know you've got bad grammar.” Right?! Well, today we're going to work through this topic through a series of questions which conveniently, 1 Corinthians 12 is going to answer for us. As you can see from your outline, we're going to consider seven questions, but don't worry, I'm not keeping you here all day, we'll go through them at a pretty good clip.

If you've been in the church a long time, especially in an evangelical church, maybe you're grown tired of this topic. You've taken spiritual gift inventories several times throughout your life and the results haven't really changed, and what's more, it doesn't seem to affect your day-to-day life. Or maybe this topic is new to you and if anything, it sounds kind of weird. So you're asking at the outset, do we really need to spend a whole morning on this?

So the first question

QUESTION #1 is, *“Does it really matter if I know about spiritual gifts?”*

Well, I think Paul would say unequivocally, yes. In fact, in the very first verse of our chapter, Paul says, *“Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.”* Clearly he believes that this is a topic crucial for all of us to understand and apply. Not only did Paul find it important to address this topic in this chapter, it continues through the application of love in chapter 13, and chapter 14 is going to focus specifically on the spiritual gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues. So, if you're keeping score, Paul gives more real estate in this letter to spiritual gifts than to any other specific topic. That alone should indicate to us that it's worth our time to really study and reflect on the importance of spiritual gifts.

Maybe another question we need to address early on is who among us gets to get one of these spiritual gifts? Do you have to be a super spiritual person? And the question that I have on your outline:

QUESTION #2: *How do I know if I have the right kind of spirituality to have a spiritual gift? (2–3)*

Well, Paul would say, “I'm glad you asked.” That's exactly where he starts his discussion of this. Let's read verses 2–3.

²You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. ³Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

Don't get bogged down in the talk about pagans and cursing Jesus. Paul's underlying point here is that before the Corinthians were Christians, they were drawn to spiritual things albeit the idols they worshiped led them into a false spirituality. It's not enough to be spiritual in the worldly sense, one must have the right kind of spirituality. Our American culture, in many ways, struggles with this same thing. How often have you heard someone say, "I'm a very spiritual person, but I don't like organized religion."

But Paul is saying here that simply being spiritual is not enough. One must be spiritual through Spirit of God. One must be able to say, "Jesus is Lord," and the only way to do that and truly mean it, to say not just the words, but to authentically mean from the bottom of your heart that you want Jesus to be the very Lord of your life, is through the Spirit of God. If you have accepted God's gift of salvation by grace through faith, the Holy Spirit has come to live in you and enables you to claim Jesus as Lord. And everyone who has done that receives spiritual gifts.

Ok, so spiritual gifts are important to know about, and we know now that all people who have made Jesus Lord of their life, who have the Spirit go God living in them, have these gifts. But I think the logical next question is:

QUESTION #3: "What are spiritual gifts and what are they for?" (4-7)

I'll give you a summary answer first and then we're going to go to 1 Corinthians to flesh it out. I'm defining a spiritual gift is a way in which the Holy Spirit equips believers to serve others. They are spiritual because they are in essence the Holy Spirit giving a part of Himself to each of us to enable us to act through Him. And they are gifts not just as a present for us, but so that we can be a gift or a blessing to others.

While I was reflecting on what it means to be given something in order to use it to bless others, a project we did with our kids for several years came to mind. Steve and I support several missionaries and ministries in addition to Autumn Ridge, but a few years ago, we realized that though this giving is a core value for our family, our kids really didn't see or understand it, since most of our giving happens automatically and electronically. So we wanted to figure out a way to encourage our kids to experience the joy we have in giving, and to develop this habit for themselves too. They were too young to have much money of their own yet, so we made a deal with them. From our giving budget, we allocated \$20 a month to each of our children and let them choose a specific ministry or missionary that they wanted to support. We made the donation in their name and encouraged them to follow their missionary or ministry happenings. They loved getting support letters from their missionaries, or extra goodies like the cool calendars that from each year from Mission Aviation Fellowship. This project was a really fun one for our family, and I think the kids did feel a lot more connected and interested in seeing what it meant to support missionaries and ministries. They felt joy in knowing that their contribution was making a difference in the world.

I'd like to suggest to you that maybe like how we as parents wanted to enable and equip our kids to participate in these ministries, God, who is the ultimate parent, wants to enable and equip us so that we can participate on an even bigger scale.

Stick with me here for this next thought, because I hope it'll blow you away like it did me when I thought about it. You see, there isn't anything that God couldn't do for Himself. Nothing. He could simply will into existence anything He wanted. If He wanted something to be a certain way, He could make it so by simply saying the word. But, for His own wise, amazing, and awe-inspiring reasons, God has decided to involve us in the work of building His Kingdom here on earth into all that it is and should be. He knows we're not perfect like He is. He knows we're going to drop the ball sometimes and make mistakes along the way. But He decided long ago that it was worth it to grant each of us believers a role in His work here in the world for His glory and our maturity.

Kind of like how Steve and I gave our kids some of our money to enable them to experience and participate in the role of supporting missionaries and ministries, God gives some of His attributes to His people to enable us to experience and participate in the role of building each other up. Isn't that amazing?! He wants us to get to be involved in this important work. Sure, He could just do it Himself, and no doubt He would do it better than we can, but like the good, good Father that He is, He gives us the opportunity to serve. And He does this by giving us spiritual gifts through the Holy Spirit who lives within us.

If you really let this sink in, it could forever impact how you view your role in serving the church. It's not just about filling the need, or responding when someone asks you to do something, it is about having the privilege of playing an integral role in God's work that He chose for you to do. And our creative God didn't make us all the same, all able to play the same role, He gives a huge variety of gifts so that each of us has our own unique role to play in this work, not just for own good but for the common good.

In verses 4–7, Paul makes that point. Let's read those verses.

⁴There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. ⁷Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

I expect at this point, you're waiting for the next question. **QUESTION #4:** "What specifically are these gifts?"

For that, let's read verses 8–11.

⁸To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, ¹¹and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

So in this passage we see mentioned the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, spiritual discernment, and speaking in and interpreting tongues. Later on in verse 28, Paul also mentions gifts of apostleship, teaching, helping, and administrating. Are these all the gifts? Well, no. In his letter to the Romans, also in chapter 12, Paul mentions a few of these, but adds the gifts of exhortation, service, leadership, generosity, and mercy.

I hope you had the chance to take the spiritual gift survey that we had for you last week either on paper or online. If you haven't, there are still copies available that you can take with you today on the tables. This survey, kind of like a personality test, isn't foolproof, but it can reveal the tendencies you have. In your small groups this morning, I hope you'll enjoy sharing with each other which gifts you each appear to have.

I wish we had time to talk about each one of these gifts individually. Unfortunately we don't, but I do want to make a few summary comments about this list, though. First, the gifts mentioned here are not an exhaustive list. Paul gives a slightly different list in Romans 12, and a slightly different one from that in Ephesians 4. Peter offers other roles in 1 Peter 4. Think of it like this: if I said that a healthy diet means eating blueberries, whole grains, and broccoli, that wouldn't mean that those are the only three healthy foods out there. They are representative of the kinds of foods that make up a healthy diet. Similarly, I think the lists given here and in the other passages are representative of the kinds of traits God gives people to equip them to serve.

Second, in regards to this list, I think it is safe to say that Paul mentioned these specific gifts because they were the ones that the Corinthians were squabbling over. As we'll see implied in the next section, they apparently considered people with some of these gifts to be superior to others, and later, chapter 14 will show us they were going a bit off the deep end with speaking in tongues, so I think Paul mentioned these gifts because they were inherently relevant to the Corinthian church.

Third, some of the gifts mentioned here are common to most of us to some degree, while others may be more foreign to our experience. For example, the first three in the list: wisdom, knowledge, and faith are something, hopefully, that we all have a measurable amount of. But they become a spiritual gift for those people who exude wisdom in all they say and do, those who seem to be able to learn, internalize, and retain more knowledge than the rest of us, and some whose faith never seems to waver. (And to be clear, this gift of faith is not saving faith (all Christians have that), but the kind of sure confidence in believing that God will do all that He says He will do.) But what about those other gifts like having miraculous powers? We'll address that a bit later, but first, I want to address the issue of God's design for diversity in our gifting, and specifically the question:

QUESTION #5: *"How can we be united if we're so diverse?"*

I'm going to let Paul answer that one in his own words because he figured out a pretty good analogy that I think speaks for itself. Let's read verses 12–27.

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” ²² On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴ while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Well said, Paul. Each of us is part of a greater whole. God doesn't intend for any one of us to be a one-woman show. He intentionally equips each of us with certain roles in order to serve each other, as well as to depend on each other.

God is brilliant. (I know, understatement of the day, right?) But He really is. He designed us to be diverse. God loves diversity. When he created birds, he didn't just make a robin. Look at just a few of His birds. When He created trees, He didn't just make an oak tree. Look at a few of these. When He created food, look at just a sampling of the plants that He made for us to eat.

God loves diversity. What's more, God Himself embodies diversity. Fair warning: I'm going to geek out on theology for a minute, but stay with me because this is really amazing. God's design for each of us to have a role that contributes to the whole body of the church is not just His good idea, it's a reflection of who God is Himself. Our God is three persons in one God. God is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. All three are God, none is more or less God, and they are not three separate Gods. They are unified as one God. But each person of the trinity has a distinct role. For example, the Father is sovereign over everything. The Son is our Savior who became like us to bring us back into fellowship with God, and the Spirit was sent by the Father and the Son to live in us and to be our helper as we go through this life. They live in perfect unity with one another in perfect selfless love. They are one unified God, but have distinct roles. God is the very definition of unity in diversity. Paul actually alluded to this earlier in this chapter, but it was subtle and easy to miss.

Look back at verses 4–6: ⁴*There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.* ⁵*There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.* ⁶*There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.*

Do you see it? Maybe it's clearer if you see it on the screen like this: There are different kinds of gifts, different kinds of service, and different kinds of activities, but the same Spirit, the same Lord Jesus, and the same Father God who empowers them all in everyone. Our God is one God who delights in expressing that in a variety of ways. He delights in people using their diversity to bring richness and completeness to all.

God's design for us, showing His love and brilliance, is for us to work this way too. Isn't that cool?! We are all the body of the church. Together we are whole, like God is whole. Like the Father, Son, and Spirit, we each have certain roles to play whether ours are to teach, to encourage, to share wisdom, or to inspire others with great faith or mercy.

Another question that we should address was triggered by a friend's comment to me that she doesn't really see a lot of some of these gifts today, such as people doing miracles: **QUESTION #6:** *"Should we expect to see all these gifts?"*

Some of the gifts mentioned in this chapter are readily apparent in many Christians we know, such as the gifts of helping, administrating, and teaching. But others, such as the gifts of miracles, prophecy, and interpreting tongues, aren't probably daily occurrences for most of us. They were, however, gifts that were demonstrated widely in the early church, as recorded for us in the book of Acts. They were expressions of God's power to authenticate the authority of the apostles and the authenticity of the Gospel message. Many people wonder if they should expect to see some of these more supernatural gifts in their experience today especially when they read about their frequency in the early church.

Today, there is great debate over this. Some people do believe that these miraculous gifts should continue as they did in Paul's day. However, others believe they lessened in frequency or even ceased altogether once the church was established and God's revelation to us through the Bible was complete. I want to stress that solid, Bible-believing pastors and scholars come down on all points of this spectrum, and what you believe about something like speaking in tongues is not what makes you a Christian.

I won't get into the specifics of the use of these more charismatic gifts today, because Jann will be addressing this with much more depth when she teaches on chapter 14 which is heavily focused on the gifts of prophecy and tongues. So, if this is an issue fascinating to you, stay tuned.

What I do want to do though, is to harken back to the very issue that Paul emphasizes in this chapter. We must not let our opinions about the significance of certain spiritual gifts become something that causes division between us and our fellow Christians. People are not superior nor inferior for having or lacking certain gifts, after all, it is God who decides if He wants a certain gift to be used, and who shall get to use it. If God has chosen to

cease employing a certain gift, that is His right. If He chooses to activate it again, praise Him all the more.

Let's turn back to the text and see what it has to say on this issue. We'll read verses 28–30:

28 And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

Ok, we get it Paul. We're not all going to be all those things. But don't miss the point here that God is the one who decides who has a certain gift and when it shall be used. And what's important for us, is that we strive for unity in our diversity and not let any differences in understanding and applying this topic cause divisions among us.

Well, I hope our last question is one you're asking yourself. **QUESTION #7:** *“What do I do with my spiritual gifts?” (31)*

I hope either through the survey or at some point in your past, you've identified your top gift or two or three. While it's fun self-assessment, I hope you're wanting to go beyond that and think about what this means for you. After all, if we have awareness of how God has equipped us to serve the church but don't do it, it'd be like if my kids had taken the \$20 a month that Steve and I gave them to support a missionary or ministry and instead of doing that, they pocketed the cash. That would be so selfish and disrespectful, and they'd completely miss out on the whole point that we wanted them to experience the joy and satisfaction of helping to make great ministry possible.

So, how do we sort through what to do with our gifts. I'd suggest that first we should pray about it and seek God's help in examining ourselves to see if we are currently being faithful with what God has given us. Maybe you're already are serving in an area that God has called you to. That is great! I am not about to guilt trip you into adding more to an already-full plate. But maybe you hear God saying to you, “I've got something great in store that I'd like you to be a part of.” Maybe today is the day that you'll really listen to God's tug on your heart and move forward with that ministry you've been dreaming about.

If you feel like you have something to offer, but not sure how to get going, here's an easy place to start. Autumn Ridge has recently developed a great tool on its website for getting plugged in to a whole variety of ministries. On the website's home screen, click on “Fully Connect with Us” and then the “Go to the Serving Page.” From there, you'll see a list of several different categories of ministry, and if you click on a category, the next page will show you several different possibilities for involvement in that ministry. Indicate your interest in any area you choose and someone will contact you soon about to get involved.

In addition, if you're looking for a way to serve the broader body of Christ in our community, there is also a database with several ideas for how to serve in a variety of community-based ministries. Check it out!

I want to wrap this up with one final family story. One of my very favorite places to visit is Disney World in Florida, especially the Epcot part of Disney World. There is a ride (or attraction as they call it) there called Mission: Space which simulates a mission to Mars. Have you been on this before? Not only is this ride a full-motion flight simulator which tips and tilts making you feel as if you're moving through space, the whole thing secretly spins around on a centrifuge so that you actually pull G-forces as your rocket launches into space. It's a pretty fun thrill ride. I love it, my poor husband despises it, as it made him more motion sick than he'd ever been in his life. He got off that ride and laid face down on the concrete for an aching long time. Anyway, as you prepare to go on this ride, you're divided into groups of 4 and each person in the group is assigned a certain role. There's the commander, pilot, engineer, and navigator. And during the ride each person has a specific task they are supposed to perform. At various points, buttons light up that you're supposed to push, and when you push the buttons at the right time, the right things happen. Well, of course, the first time my family went on this, we were impressed and even a little bit daunted that this was a ride that actually expected something of us. We couldn't just sit there and be entertained. I admit, maybe somewhat gullibly, that I actually felt a bit nervous that I might screw it up. It's really silly if you think about it. After all, little kids are going on this thing every 5 minutes, so surely a grown woman with a prior career as a pilot should be able to handle pushing a fake button on cue. Well, of course, our first time on the mission ended successfully, we all having performed our expected tasks. However, the second time we went on it, and that "we" would be the children and me because Steve was still lying on the grass wishing he'd never even heard the name Mission: Space, the second time we went on it, the boys did what young boys do. They wanted to find out what would happen if they didn't push the button as directed. To your great surprise I'm sure, the ride didn't crash or explode, instead this computerized voice came on and said something to effect of "computer override" and automatically did the task itself.

I hope God doesn't mind me comparing His awesome plan for how we are equipped to serve the body of Christ with a 4-minute thrill ride at Disney World. But I see similarities. We are each assigned a role to play, and early on it may be exciting, daunting, or even a bit nerve-wracking as we take on the adventure of using our gifts to serve. But over time, it may be tempting to let it slide. And if we don't perform our assigned tasks, it is possible that God will make His will happen in another way without us, like the computer override. However, that's not the point. God is eager for us to be a blessing to other people through our gifts and eager for us to experience the satisfaction and thrill of seeing a job well done. He can accomplish His will however He chooses, but He wants us to be a part of that work.

Paul ends this chapter saying

³¹ But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

God doesn't just want us to be a part of His work, He wants us to want to be a part of that work. Do you want that? I challenge you to make today a time to reflect on how you are serving, and how God may be calling you to serve. I hope you'll feel inspired as you work through this together with your small groups now. Let me pray for you before you go.

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