SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Discovering What They Are and How to Use Them





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If we listen to the instruction of Scripture, we must remember that our talents are not of our own making, but free gifts of God.
JOHN CALVIN[1]

INTRODUCTION:

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Three principles can be found in the New Testament concerning spiritual gifts that work like strong barbwire fences to keep us from going astray.

- *The first principle is that when spiritual gifts are truly being energized by the Holy Spirit, they never exalt anyone or anything except the Lord Jesus Christ and Him crucified.*

[1] John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold: A Treasury of Quotations for Christians* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2006), 614.

This is the heart of the Gospel and the sum of the Spirit's revelatory ministry. If Jesus is not the center of the church's worship and focus or if Jesus is not being proclaimed, known, loved, worshiped, obeyed, served, modeled, and expressed, you can be sure that the Spirit is nowhere in it.

- *The second principle is that spiritual gifts are always for the benefit of the church.* They are not liabilities, but tremendous assets.

  Spiritual gifts can be *unappreciated*, *undiscovered*, *unused*, and *unbalanced*. Spiritual gifts should never be used for *self-glorification*, *self-affirmation,* or *self-promotion* in the world. Likewise, since they are regarded as *tools to publicly build the church*, they should not be considered *toys of manipulation.*

- *The third principle concerning spiritual gifts* is that we must remember what keeps us from going astray, namely *God never asks us to give something to Him that He has not freely given to us.*

  Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse was one of the greatest preachers and illustrators of our generation. He tells the story of walking into the nursery to see his 2 ½-year-old son who was occupied with a lesson from his mother. A blindfold was put over his eyes, and then Dr. Barnhouse placed little wooden objects in his hands and asked him to identify them by their shapes. As his little fingers felt the cube, the boy said, "cube." As his fingers felt the ball, he said, "round," and so on. Then, to test his ability a little further, he placed both the cube and the ball in his son's hand and asked him to give him the ball. Then it dawned on the great preacher that this is exactly God's way of dealing with His children.[2]

  God never asks anything of His children that He has not provided already as a gift. For instance, when God asks you to love someone, it is because through the Holy Spirit He has already poured out His love into your heart *(Rom.5:5).* If He asks for mercy or help to be given, it is because He has already given you the ability to do it. The exercise of spiritual gifts is God's calling for each of His children to simply give back to Him what He has given initially to them.

AIM OF THIS STUDY:

In this study, we will highlight some basic questions the Apostle Paul addresses in these verses and elsewhere. We will then garner all the New Testament teaches concerning spiritual gifts while simultaneously providing clarity regarding these four headings:

A. Discovering our gifts
B. Classifying our gifts
C. Developing our gifts
D. Using our gifts

[2] Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Timeless Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 91.

CONTEXT:

The Apostle Paul introduced the main theme of spiritual gifts by reminding us that the doctrine of spiritual gifts is actually a study of *spiritual matters [Read 1 Cor.12:1—note the word "gifts" does not appear in the original language. Paul didn't want these believers or us to be in the dark about "spirituals" (pneumatikos) or "spiritual things or matters"]*. He achieves this by underscoring the *foundation*, *variation,* and *manifestation* of spiritual gifts.

- **In verses 2-3, the foundation of spiritual gifts** needed to be revisited as a result of the Corinthians' ignorant indulgence in matters connected to their pagan background. For example, in verse 2, Paul reveals when they sought to mix the experience-centered pagan worship of their past with the Christ-centered worship that was supposed to be at the heart of the church, they got off track resulting in their ignorance to discern whether the Holy Spirit was leading them or not.

- The apostle gives a two-fold test. *The first was to know what the Holy Spirit would never do (12:3a). The second was to know what the Holy Spirit would always do (12:3b). First,* He would never defame Christ or rob Him of His glory in any way. Secondly, He would glorify Christ always. So, how can you tell if the Spirit is leading you? Christ, as the foundation of spiritual matters, will be the center of your worship and devotion. Lastly, if Christ is not *known*, *loved*, *worshiped*, *obeyed*, *followed*, *served*, *modeled,* and *exalted* this is not of the Holy Spirit.

- **In verses 4-6, Paul explains the variations of spiritual gifts.** According to His sovereign will, God energizes and distributes spiritual gifts. This means His resources are *limitless* and *infinite* whereby believers can exercise their gifts to accomplish a variety of ministries in the local church.

- **Finally, Paul teaches that the manifestation of spiritual gifts** is for the common good of the church *(v.7).* Charles Hodge asserts, "Whenever the gifts of God are used to promote self in any way, it is a sin against their Giver as well as against those for whose benefit they were given."[3]

KEY QUESTIONS:

What is a spiritual gift? Theologically speaking, the word "*gift*" *(Cf.1 Pet.4:10)* comes from the Greek word *charisma*. *Charis* means grace and the suffix *ma* indicates that it is *the result of grace*. While spiritual gifts may be defined as the things grace does in the life of a believer, a spiritual gift is not the same as *the gift of the Spirit*. The gift of the Holy Spirit is a Person given at the moment of regeneration *(Eph.1:13)* or when you are born again. On the other hand, *a spiritual gift is an ability or skill*—the result of unmerited and undeserved grace from God in Christ and not a reward for service.

Since they are *grace gifts* matched perfectly with who we are as believers and coupled with the needs of His church, you do not need to pray, fast, or plead with God for spiritual gifts—for they cannot be obtained by *self-effort*.

Further, spiritual gifts are not *spiritual trophies* we earn by excelling in our natural talents. Spiritual gifts are not *the ability to do things skillfully*.

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[3] Charles Hodges, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians* (1857, repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 244.

They are gifts or "actualized powers," meaning they are nothing more or less than Christ Himself ministering *through His body, to His body, for His Father's glory*. As noted by J.I. Packer, another way of looking at spiritual gifts from a heavenly perspective is that they are *pieces of evidence of Christ's enthronement (Eph.4:7-8; Acts 2:33).*

Practically speaking, *a spiritual gift is a skill or ability enabling each Christian to perform a function in the body of Christ with ease and effectiveness*. When we exercise our gift, we contribute to and benefit the whole body, which is similar to adding a missing piece to a puzzle.

WHY ARE SPIRITUAL GIFTS IMPORTANT?

1. **They keep the body balanced.** *(Read 1 Cor.12:14-27)*

   The analogy that Paul makes in the second half of Chapter 12 is classic. In essence, Paul says, "The church is not one gigantic eyeball, ear, or nose!" His point is clear: although variety keeps and safeguards us from riding a hobbyhorse and being preoccupied in the church with one thing over another, everyone is needed, and honor is shared by the entire body.

2. **They keep the church healthy.** *(Read Eph.4:15-16)*

   This is one of the clearest passages about the importance of spiritual gifts. In essence, Paul tells us that a church body is where each member lives for the well-being of the whole. When we do what we can to enrich others, it does not matter how great or small the task is. Love will be the energy that activates every nerve resulting in the growth of the body. How does it grow? It grows first in *submission to the Head* and as it grows in submission, it will grow also in *coordination*.

   When a church is healthy, there will be *submission to Christ*, *coordination with others*, and a *progression in faith*. Note, Paul speaks of maturity. Within the church, many believe they can mature outside of the body; however, this is a huge mistake. Paul calls us to think of our physical bodies. If each organ is not working for the good of the others, maturity does not occur within the whole body. Similarly, when one organ stops functioning, it affects the whole body, and growth is stunted. Such is the case within the church.

   If you are serious about spiritual growth and maturity, then you cannot *restrict* yourself to those aspects of church life that appeal to you. Perhaps you are irregular in attendance or passive in participating. Maybe you are not *giving* or uninvolved in hospitality by leaving the tasks of the church to others. If so, a **me-first attitude** is being manifested, and, if you are truly a part of God's family, the Word of God calls you to repent! Until you learn to live the Christian life right here within the church, you will never make progress spiritually or fulfill your purpose in the world.

EXPOSITION:

With those two key questions answered, let us take all the New Testament says about spiritual gifts. What would the apostle have us know about the issue of spiritual gifts?

A. We Must Discover Our Gifts.

How can you discover your spiritual gift? Romans 12:1-5 provides four steps:

1. **Presentation** *(v.1)*—Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship.

   Using the language of a sacrificial offering, Paul offers a striking contrast. R.C. Sproul once stated, "The sacrificial system of the Old Testament is over, but there is still a New Testament sacrificial system. It is not a sacrifice that we give in order to make atonement, but a sacrifice that we give because atonement has been made."[4]

   While some believe that to be a Christian one needs only to attend church or serve a few hours in ministry, the truth is that a true Christian life is *a life of sacrifice and presentation*. It is a life whereby one is making a gift of oneself to God. Hence, a true believer has been set apart and consecrated unto God.

   In light of what He has done for us—along with His mercies—presenting ourselves to Him is the only reasonable thing to do. Because we are *living sacrifices* and not dead ones, this must be settled once and for all. This is achieved by daily presenting ourselves to Him. To *discover your spiritual gift*, you must first *present your life to God*.

2. **Transformation** *(v.2)*—And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

   Here, Paul tells us that if we want our lives to change or to be used by God, we must *renew our minds and train ourselves to think scripturally about everything in life*. The burning question that compels the true Christian is: "What is God's will?"

   Question: why do you need a new mind? **Answer:** so you can know what the will of God is! The word **"prove"** here means to *discern* or *experience* the will of God. As you renew your mind with the truth of God's Word and learn to think spiritually and scripturally about everything, you can discern and experience the will of God. And just so we are not confused about what God's will is, Paul tells us that it is **"good"** as opposed to bad—so you do not have to fear it. It is **"acceptable,"** which means it is suited perfectly to your present situation. Finally, it is **"perfect,"** which means *it is the divine standard that completely reflects God's holiness*.

If you are to discover your spiritual gift, there must first be *the presentation of your life*, second, *the transformation of your mind*, and then third…

3. **Evaluation** *(v.3)*—For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

[4] R.C. Sproul, *Romans: An Expositional Commentary* (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2019), 195.

In other words, Paul tells us it is easy to have *the wrong view of ourselves,* and therefore, a balanced perspective is essential to the success of the evaluation process. A balanced perspective originates from two elements: *remembering who God is* and *remembering who you are*. If we know who God is, then without the grace of God, we know we cannot make a significant move in this world. Knowing that we are utterly dependent upon grace for any achievement will make us humble.

However, there is a balance here. Sometimes we may possess *too low of an opinion of ourselves* and think *only of our insignificance* and *worthlessness*. But the second half of this verse says *God has allotted to each*, namely, each of His children—*"a measure of faith."* This often can be interpreted as a "quantity of faith" as though God has given to some "big" faith and others "little" faith. Potentially, envy and divisiveness could result as opposed to unity. A measure of faith means *God has given you exactly what you need to carry out His will*, and therefore, whatever God assigns to you is valuable!

Presentation, *transformation*, *evaluation,* and finally…

4. **Cooperation** *(vv.4-5)*—For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, **5** so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

   Clearly, Paul tells us the only way to discover your gift is in the *fellowship* and *cooperation* of the local church.

B. We Must Classify Our Gifts.

The passages in the Bible concerning spiritual gifts are *1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 12:28-30; Romans 12:6-8; Ephesians 4:11; and 1 Peter 4:11.* A compilation of these results in a three-fold classification of gifts in the Bible:

1. There are speaking gifts. *(Eph.4:11-12)*

- **Apostles** (*apostolos*) means, "*one sent with authority*." From the Latin equivalent, we obtain our English word *missionary*. According to Acts 1:21-22, two requirements had to be fulfilled before one became an apostle. *Initially, one had to have been with the disciples from the time of John's baptism and witnessed the resurrected Lord (Cf. 1 Cor.9:1)*. Their role was authenticated by the power to perform miracles *(2 Cor.12:12)*. Even though these men were called to lay the foundational doctrines of the church and to write Scripture *(Eph.2:19-21)*, their office ceased with their passing.

- **Prophets** (*prophetes*) means "*to speak forth*." Most of the time when we think of a prophet, we think of someone who predicts the future. While this was true in the Old Testament, that is not the most basic meaning. A prophet was one who *stood before God's people and said, "Thus says the Lord."* Because the New Testament was not complete, within the early church, the gifts of the apostles and prophets were highly valuable. Thus, God used the apostles to pen the Scriptures and lay out the doctrine, and consequently, the prophets were there to encourage and edify the church *(1 Cor.14:4b)*.

Although they received revelations, once the New Testament was complete, prophets were no longer essential to this process, prompting Peter to conclude, *"We have the prophetic word made more sure" (2 Pet.1:19)*. Thus, God no longer mediates His Word directly through a man or a prophet, but now He speaks His Word through pastor-teachers.

- **Evangelists** (*euangelistes*) could be literally translated as *"gospellers."* As soon as churches are founded, false teachers try to infiltrate them. These false teachers have all the right language, but they use it in a different sense. New Christians are easily taken in by them and can easily start to believe a "gospel" that is not the true Gospel.

  Evangelists were needed to keep defining the true Gospel in the face of subtle enemies who potentially could destroy it. While both Timothy and Titus were evangelists, Paul sent Timothy to ward off false teachers in Ephesus as well as in other churches he had founded *(Read 1 & 2 Timothy)*. Today, evangelists are modern-day missionaries in the truest sense.

- **Teaching** *(Rom.12:7; Acts 13:1; 1 Cor.12:28; 14:26)*—The grace gift of teaching *(didasko)* is the spiritual ability and capacity to do the required study to understand and explain the revelation of God's Word. It results in the imparting of skills and knowledge to those who believe, equipping God's people to live as disciples of Christ *(Matt.28:18-20)*. Teaching falls into three general responsibilities in the New Testament. The first is evangelism, and as such, all God's people are to teach in evangelism *(Matt.28:18-20)*. The second is edification, and as such, all God's people are to admonish and teach one another to edify the church *(Col.3:16)*. The third is equipping, and only some are qualified and called to equip the church *(Eph.4:11-12)*.

- **Word of wisdom and knowledge** *(1 Cor.12:8)*—The wisdom and knowledge Paul speaks of here is not the kind of wisdom and knowledge that is available to every Christian or that is described in James 1:5. In 1 Corinthians 12:8, *"wisdom"* may be defined as *a deep insight into God's truth*. *"Knowledge,"* on the other hand, is *the ability to take the deep things of God in some particular area of truth, requiring digging and explaining it to God's people*. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, and teaching are categorized as *speaking gifts*, while "wisdom" and "knowledge" are regarded as *abilities* found within the other speaking gifts.

- **Discernment or the distinguishing of spirits** *(1 Cor.12:10; 14:29; 1 Thess.5:20-21; 1 John 4:1)*—This gift is simply *an ability to discern spiritual good from spiritual evil* and is to be exercised by all Christians; however, it is also *the sum total of wisdom and knowledge*. The Puritans referred to discernment as the "*gift of penetration*" or *an ability to assess things realistically or to get to the bottom of things*.

2. There are serving gifts. *(Rom.12:7; 1 Pet.4:10-11)*

- **Serving or helps** *(1 Cor.12:28; Rom.12:7)*—This is an ability to *assist* and *support* others in a practical and/or behind-the-scenes manner resulting in public ministries functioning effortlessly. Phoebe is an example.

- **Exhortation** *(Rom.12:8)* is a derivative from the same Greek word used for the Holy Spirit, and is translated as "helper, counselor, comforter." This is an ability to *bring encouragement to others by helping them understand the relevance of Scripture*, while simultaneously *motivating, comforting,* and *offering a hope that prompts action*. An example of one who possesses this gift may be characterized as a person who looks another square in the eyes and confronts their sinful wanderings. Although initially, their words may seem to *wound*, they also possess a *gentle ability to restore another's spirit* and steer him back onto the path to God. Priscilla and Aquila are two examples.

- **Giving** *(Rom.12:8)*—This is a person with the ability to *contribute material resources to the Lord's work with generosity, frequency, cheerfulness, and without coercion to give to others*. Further, those possessing this gift refuse to maintain records of their contributions given to compete with others, to grumble when an opportunity to give arises, or to draw public attention to their contributions. Barnabas is an example.

- **Leading or administrating** *(Rom.12:8; 1 Cor.12:28)* is different from the gift of helps. In the Greek language, it is a nautical term, and it refers to steering a ship. On one side of the coin, *this gift refers to someone who can administrate or calmly guide ministries through dangerous and difficult challenges*. They possess an innate ability *to envision a goal and the skill to guide people toward it*. On the flip side of the coin lies the gift of leadership. Leadership is the ability to preside as one who leads with common sense and creativity. An exhorter is one who *corrects another with a mother's good wisdom.* Still, those characterized as givers provide another with *a mother's selfless spirit*. An administrator *guides with a mother's firm hand*.

- **Mercy** *(Rom.12:8)*—An individual possessing this gift is one with *an inherent ability to sense another's needs and embrace them with warmth, comfort, and hope*. While being very *perceptive* and possessing an ability to articulate clearly, they also possess *the capacity to sit quietly and merely permit their presence to bring a sense of hope*. Consequently, the presence of a person possessing the gift of mercy revives those who suffer from the hot anguish of life, like a cool cloth on the forehead. Onesiphorus is an example *(2 Tim.1:15-18)*.

- **Faith** *(1 Cor.12:9; Rom.12:6)* is given to every Christian; however, this gift is tied specifically to *the speaking gifts* embodied within the Book of Romans and refers to those who *pursue God's will with extraordinary confidence*. Moreover, one with the gift of faith embraces God's will regardless of the circumstances. The Apostle Paul is an example.

3. **There are sign gifts.** *(2 Cor.12:12; 1 Cor.12:9-10)*

   - **Healing and miracles**—The word "sign" (*semeion*) in the Bible signifies *an identifying mark*. It was an act that verified someone was from God. Further, Jesus performed signs to demonstrate His glory or the sum total of His perfections *(John 2:11).*

     The apostles were given the ability to effectuate miracles to authenticate their office and distinguish them from false teachers *(2 Cor.12:12)*.

In connection with faith *(James 5:13-15),* we must distinguish between *faith healers* and *the healing provided by God*. Upon gathering all the Bible teaches concerning miracles, signs, and healing, one will discover the following:

Sign gifts were given to affirm His spokesmen in the Old Testament and His Son along with the apostles in the New Testament. However, they are no longer given to men today. Although sign gifts have served their purpose, it does not imply that all miracles and healing have ceased.

As it relates to miracles of healing, James provides some practical advice *(Cf. James 5:13-16)*

a. First, praying for one another is essential—so we must practice it!
b. Second, the application of medical assistance is integral—so we must utilize it!
c. Third, the confession of sin is healthy—so we must employ it!
d. Fourth, when healing comes from the Lord, thank God for it but don't build a theology around it.

If you have been paying attention, you may have noticed I omitted the issue of tongues and the interpretation of tongues. Since Paul addresses the issue in its entirety in 1 Corinthians 14, we will wait and expound upon it then.

RECAP:

- *We must discover our gifts by presentation, transformation, evaluation, and cooperation.*
- *We must classify our gifts as either speaking, serving, or sign gifts.*

C. We Must Develop Our Gifts.

Once we discover *what our gifts are* and *classify them*, we are responsible for developing *them.* How are we to accomplish this? In response, Scripture supplies two commands:

1. **We must not neglect our gifts** *(1 Tim.4:14).* Paul said to Timothy—*"Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you.."* The verb *"neglect"* (*ameleo*) means *to "make light of or to be careless about."* Jesus employs this same word in Matthew 22:5 to describe the actions of the people upon their rejection of an invitation to the king's dinner. In so doing, the people *"paid no attention"* and subsequently went their own way. Here, the Apostle Paul is seeking to teach us that spiritual gifts do not operate automatically but require *attention* and *application* on the part of the believer!

2. **We must commit our gifts to God** *(2 Tim.1:6)—"For this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God."* The Greek New Testament scholar, A.T. Robertson, translates this phrase as follows: "*keep blazing,*" "*stir up*," or *"rekindle."* The idea here is that "the tendency of fire is to go out, so watch the fire on the altar of your heart!" In other words, *keep it hot by use* and if it is dying, *rekindle it by employing it consistently*!

D. We Must Use Our Gifts.

Now that you have discovered *what the gifts are*, *classified* them, and heard the admonition to *develop* them, the following two key elements always should be reflected upon:

1. Gifts are to be used for *the good of others*. *(1 Pet.4:10)*
2. Gifts are to be used for *the glory of God*. *(1 Pet.4:11)*

CONCLUSION:

- **Be informed**—so that you are cognizant as to which gifts are applicable today.

- **Be open**—remember your gift may be perceived differently by others than what may be perceived by you.

- **Be available**—serve in various areas and reject the notion of serving merely in a manner that is most comfortable to you.

- **Be sensitive**—carefully consider the feedback you acquire from your leaders as well as members of the body.

- **Be diligent and faithful**—oftentimes gifts may not be seen on the surface, thus diligence may be required over the long haul.

Richard Newton, the distinguished preacher in the late 1800s, authored a book entitled, *Bible Jewels and the Lessons Taught by Them for Children*. Within this book, he conveys that some stones resemble diamonds so closely that even a diamond merchant is unable to ascertain the difference between a genuine jewel and an imitation.

Newton relates the story of a black man residing in Brazil who wrote to the emperor informing him that he had found an enormous diamond—the largest that had ever been seen—prompting him to request the privilege to appear in person to present it to the emperor. Consequently, one of the emperor's carriages was sent down for him, and upon his arrival, he threw himself toward the feet of the emperor and presented the diamond. While the emperor was astonished as he beheld the diamond, so were all the nobles in the court, resulting in their examining it with great care. Upon doing so, they found it was approximately a pound in weight, and thereafter began to calculate its worth to be almost 50 million pounds.

Once the large diamond was purchased, it was stored carefully in a strong chest maintained within the emperor's locked jewel room. Soldiers were appointed to guard it night and day.

Several weeks later, an English gentleman known to be an excellent judge of diamonds visited the emperor who invited him into his jewel room to examine his great treasure. The strong chest was opened and the huge diamond was brought forth. As he drew across the surface of the large jewel, it made a scratch revealing it was a fake. At this point, the English gentleman said to the emperor, *"All that glitters is not gold."* Since a genuine diamond cannot be scratched, men began to recognize that one of the ways to detect a counterfeit diamond was by attempting to scratch it. Still, another way was by placing it alongside an authentic diamond and comparing the two together.

The same is true of spiritual gifts. However, if one wants to discern whether a spiritual gift is true or untrue, *one must compare it to Jesus to confirm whether it is like Him* as opposed to another Christian possessing this particular gift.

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