

Gifts

Connect Season 2
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Gifts

Gifts

Introduction

“Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.” (1 Corinthians 12.1)

Pau’s words were written to the church at Corinth. He didn’t write those words because the gifts of the Spirit were absent in the Corinthian church. He wrote them because there was an abundance of gifts, but he wanted to ensure that the Corinthians understood the purpose of gifts. He wanted to make sure that those gifts were administered properly. And he wanted to ensure that the Corinthian Christians didn’t focus too narrowly on certain gifts.

For some of us these studies will be an eye opener, because we don’t know much about spiritual gifts. Others might find that they *thought* they knew about spiritual gifts, but that their understanding was not consistent with what the Bible teaches. And for others still, this teaching will refresh what you already know.

Whatever category you fall into, or *think* you fall into, I pray that the end result will be that, to quote Paul again, you will be more determined to *follow the way of love* and to *eagerly desire spiritual gifts* (1 Corinthians 14.1).

Gifts

Study 1: The Gift Collection

“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.” (1 Corinthians 12.4-6)

The church at Corinth was a church that had all sorts of issues. Even if you read quickly through 1 Corinthians you will find that there are numerous problems. However, one area in which this church was strong was in the area of *spiritual gifts* (1 Corinthians 1.5-7). Even so, Paul felt the need to teach these Christians about the gifts of the Spirit.

Paul sets out his fullest teaching on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14. In the studies that follow we are going to explore what those gifts were, how they functioned and how we can develop the gifts God has given us in such a way that we build up the people around us.

In this study we are going to look at the gifts that are listed in 1 Corinthians 12 and what their characteristics. Hopefully this will help us to understand why God has given gifts to His church.

This first study looks at what we might call the *gift collection*.

What *are* the gifts that we talk about and that Paul teaches about?

Here are the gifts that are listed in 1 Corinthians 12 (8-10):

Message of wisdom

Message of knowledge

Faith

Gifts of healing

Miraculous powers

Prophecy

Gifts

Distinguishing between spirits

Speaking in different kinds of tongues

Interpretation of tongues

These are sometimes referred to as the *nine gifts of the Spirit*.

However, Paul lists other gifts in this chapter (28):

Apostles

Prophets

Teachers

Helping

Guidance (sometimes translated *administration*)

What are we told about these gifts?

The gifts are divine and diverse (4-7, 19-20)

Divine origin

The first thing to note is that the gifts have a *divine origin*:

“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. 7 Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”

Notice the words *the same Spirit* (4), *the same Lord* (5), *the same God at work* (6).

And the gifts are described in verse 7 as *the manifestation of the Spirit*.

They are not human abilities. They are not based on educational ability. They are not based on your personality, though they might be reflected *in* your personality. They are gifts *from the Holy Spirit*. In fact these verses indicate that all three members of the Trinity express themselves through spiritual gifts.

Gifts

Diversity

Another aspect of these gifts is that they are *diverse*.

There are *different kinds of gifts* (4), *different kinds of service* (5), *different kinds of working* (6). The lists in verses 8-10 and verse 28 emphasise this point. And just to make sure no-one misses the point Paul says that the gifts in the church are like different parts of the human body (12-27).

We have different gifts. That is the way it is meant to be. If we all had the same gift, church would not work (19-20):

“If they were all one part, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, but one body.”

The gifts build community (7)

The whole point of spiritual gifts is to *build up the body of Christ – the church community*:

“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”

This is a very important point. Possibly the most important point in everything Paul says about spiritual gifts. Because if we miss this one point, we’ve missed the whole point of spiritual gifts! The Corinthians Christians were in danger of doing just that. They were in danger of focussing so much on speaking in tongues that they neglected the other gifts that are necessary for building the church.

This is also why Paul devotes chapter 13 to *love*. He effectively says that you can have all the gifts in the world, but if there is no love in your life, your gifts are pointless.

So this is the starting point: God gives us gifts to build each other up. If your “gift” does not build others up, it is failing in God’s purpose.

Notice too that Paul describes gifts, as we saw above, as a *manifestation of the Spirit*.

Gifts

In times when the Spirit is poured out people sometimes behave in strange ways. That kind of behaviour is not a manifestation of the Spirit. It is a human reaction to the Spirit or even just learned behaviour.

The Spirit manifests Himself through spiritual gifts. And through those gifts He enables us to build up the church community.

The gifts are complimentary (12-30)

The gifts of the Spirit compliment each other in the way that different parts of the human body compliment each other.

The church is a body made up of many parts, yet it is one body (12-14)

This has a number of implications.

Every part is essential (15-21)

Just as a healthy body has lots of different functioning parts, so the body of Christ only functions properly when all the parts are functioning.

We really do need each other! We are *interdependent*. Not dependant. Not independent. *Interdependent*.

Some of the most important parts don't get much profile (22-25)

No-one can see your brain, or your heart or your liver, but if any of these is missing you are in trouble (22)!

And, of course there are parts of the body we treat with modesty. We make sure we "cover up" (23)!

There are people in the church who have very little profile, but without them the church would be considerably weakened. Even if we don't honour those people because we can't see their contribution, God honours them (24).

One part of the body is just as important as the other (25).

Gifts

Emotional connection (26)

Because we are interdependent, it means that what affects one, affects everyone else. Just as pain in one part of the body affects the rest of the body, pain in one part of the body of Christ affects the rest. And when one part of the body is rejoicing, so the rest rejoices.

We need each other. We are interdependent, just like the human body.

Conclusion

God has given the church an amazing collection of diverse gifts. We need to use those gifts to build up others so that the body of Christ, the church is healthy and growing. We all have a part to play. Every part of the body of Christ is essential just as every part of the human body is essential. We really do need one another!

For reflection

What do you think God is saying to you through this study?

Why do you think it is important to recognise the diversity of gifts?

How can we build each other up through using our gifts?

Gifts

Can you think of a time when you were built up by someone using their gift?
How did that make you feel?

What might happen if we forget that the gifts are given for the *common good* (7)?

How can knowing that God honours us when we don't get much profile encourage us to keep using our gifts when it seems to go unnoticed?

Why do we really need each other? What does that look like?

Gifts

Declaration

God, we thank you for the gifts that you have given to your church. Thank you that you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, work through these gifts to build us up (1 Corinthians 12.4-7).

Thank you that you make all sorts of gifts available to all of us (1 Corinthians 12.7; 8-10).

Help us to remember that these gifts are given to us so that we can build up others (1 Corinthians 12.7). We declare that we will make it our aim to use our gifts to build others up.

We acknowledge that we are one body and each of us has a part to play (1 Corinthians 12.12-14). We honour every part of the body as essential (1 Corinthians 12.22). And we thank you that you honour those people in the body of Christ who aren't always seen but play a very important part (1 Corinthians 12.24).

We declare that we will play whatever part that you have called us to play, whether it is seen and recognised by others or not. We will do this because we know that you will honour us in your time and in your way.

We recognise that we need each other. And we declare that we will use our gifts to establish deep relationships with one another so that we feel each other's hurt and experience each other's joy (1 Corinthians 12.26).

Thank you that you have given us all gifts and that we all have a part to play in building up the body of Christ. Amen.

Gifts

Study 2: Unwrapping the gifts

The gifts of the Spirit were poured out on the early church as a confirmation of the word that was preached. Hebrews 2.3-4 says

“This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. 4 God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.”

In this session we are going to look at those gifts and how gifts operate.

We are going to focus on the nine gifts listed in 1 Corinthians 12.8-10.

There are all sorts of ways of classifying spiritual gifts. To try and keep things simple, we are going to look at these nine gifts under three headings: gifts of influence; gifts of impact; and gifts of insight.

Gifts of influence

Acts 13 records how the leaders in the church at Antioch met together to pray. As they were worshipping and fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke. His message was that Saul (Paul) and Barnabas should be commissioned as missionaries:

“While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ 3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” (Acts 13.2-3)

We are not told how that word was delivered. But we do know that it influenced that meeting. In fact, it influenced the whole of church history! It was a “hinge moment” in the life of the church.

Prophecy is the gift that Paul encourages the Corinthians to seek more than any other (1 Corinthians 14.1).

Gifts

Prophecy builds people up. It encourages them. It comforts them. It can change the spiritual atmosphere over a church's life or over the life of an individual. It has that kind of influence (1 Corinthians 14.3).

Speaking in tongues is also a gift of influence. It is the only gift that is meant for our own personal spiritual benefit as well as that of others. *Speaking in tongues* builds up our own spirits (1 Corinthians 14.4). It is incredibly helpful in prayer. Both Paul and Jude encourage us *to pray in the Holy Spirit* (Ephesians 6.18; Jude 20).

When *speaking in tongues* is used in conjunction with *interpretation of tongues*, it can function like prophecy or prayer (1 Corinthians 14.27).

So *tongues* influences our own spirits. And it influences *the spiritual realm*.

Prophecy, tongues and *tongues plus interpretation* have the ability to positively influence people, situations and even the spiritual realm.

Gifts of Impact

Then there are what you might call gifts of *impact*.

These are the gifts of *faith, healings* and *miraculous powers (miracles)*

Acts 3 tells the story of a lame man being healed as Peter and John were going to the temple. Here's how the aftermath of the miracle is described:

"9 When all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 they recognised him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. 11 While the man held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade."

This healing had an immediate *impact*.

Peter explained how this came about:

Gifts

“By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see.”

Faith in Jesus name produced a healing.

Healing and faith are impact gifts.

So is the *gift of miracles*.

Acts 8.13 comments that Simon the sorcerer was astonished by the miracles that accompanied Philip’s ministry:

“Simon himself believed and was baptised. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.”

Signs are sometimes mentioned alongside *miracles* (for example Acts 2.22, Hebrews 2.4). Sometimes it’s hard to distinguish one from the other. Perhaps we are not meant to. The language used about gifts is descriptive rather than scientific.

And of course when you read through the gospels, you find Jesus regularly performing signs, wonders, miracles and healings.

Healing and miracles are gifts that operate *through faith*.

The gift of *faith* is probably more than simply believing God. It is more like a special gift of faith granted by God in certain situations.

When Jesus cursed the fig tree (Mark 11), He told His disciples to have faith in God. If they did, He said, they could move mountains (Mark 11.24-25).

Jesus wasn’t talking about *literal mountains*. The term was used in Jesus’ time to refer to impossibilities or huge problems. Faith in God could shift such things.

Some Bible teachers have commented that Jesus actually says have *the faith of God*. This would indicate that the kind of faith He is talking about here is more of a direct impartation from God for a specific need or problem. This would seem to be the kind of faith Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 12.

Gifts

Gifts of Insight

There's a story in Luke's gospel (5.17-26) in which Jesus heals a paralysed man. Some religious teachers are present. They aren't outwardly opposing what Jesus is saying or doing. But in their hearts, they are accusing Him of blasphemy (21).

Luke then makes this statement: *"Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, 'Why are you thinking these things in your hearts?'"* (22)

Jesus has supernatural *insight* into what is really going on.

The gifts of *wisdom, knowledge* and *distinguishing between spirits* are gifts of *insight*.

Often these gifts are referred to as the *word of wisdom*, the *word of knowledge* and *discernment of spirits*.

What are they?

Word of wisdom

The *word of wisdom* is wisdom given to us by the Holy Spirit. It can unlock situations, solve problems or provide wise answers to difficult or even loaded questions.

One of the best examples is found in the incident when Jesus was asked if Jewish people should pay taxes to Caesar. Here's how Jesus answered:

"But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, 'You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? 19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax.' They brought him a denarius, 20 and he asked them, 'Whose image is this? And whose inscription?'
21 'Caesar's,' they replied.

Then he said to them, 'So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.'

22 When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away."
(Matthew 22.18-22)

The Holy Spirit makes that kind of supernatural wisdom available to us.

Gifts

Word of knowledge

A *word of knowledge* is information that is revealed to us rather than what we can learn naturally through conversation or research.

One of the best examples of a *word of knowledge* in action is found in John 4. Jesus is able to tell the Samaritan woman things that naturally He did not know:

“16 He told her, ‘Go, call your husband and come back.’ 17 ‘I have no husband,’ she replied. Jesus said to her, ‘You are right when you say you have no husband. 18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.’ 19 ‘Sir,’ the woman said, ‘I can see that you are a prophet.’”

Later on, the woman described Jesus in this way:

“Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, ‘He told me everything I’ve ever done.’ “ (John 4.39)

And the end result was that lots of people believed:

The Holy Spirit is able to reveal information to us that can give us insight into the lives of others and enable us to help them move closer to God.

Discernment of Spirits

The gift of *discernment of spirits* is an ability given by the Holy Spirit to determine the true spiritual source behind words or actions.

One of the best examples is found in Acts 16.

Paul and Silas are in Philippi. They are “stalked” by a young woman who keeps telling everyone that Paul and Silas are God’s messengers of salvation.

What she is saying is true. They are God’s messengers of salvation. Yet Paul eventually confronts her and casts a demon out of her:

“Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. 17 She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, ‘These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you

Gifts

the way to be saved.’ 18 She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned round and said to the spirit, ‘In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!’ At that moment the spirit left her.”

Paul had discerned that an evil spirit was at work. And he dealt with the spirit.

The Holy Spirit provides the insight to distinguish good from bad, even when appearances can suggest otherwise.

Conclusion

The Holy Spirit makes gifts of influence, impact and insight available to the church. Let’s pray that we will receive these gifts into our lives and use them for God’s glory and to build up people.

These are gifts that we need to seek (1 Corinthians 14.1)

For Reflection

What do you think God is saying to you through this study?

Why do you think gifts of *influence* (tongues, interpretation and prophecy) are so important?

How can we encourage each other to develop gifts of *influence*?

Gifts

How could a gift of *impact* (faith, healings, miracles) impact your life or the lives of those around you?

How can gifts of *insight* (wisdom, knowledge, discernment) change situations?

What gifts do you want to receive? Pray for one another to receive gifts.

Gifts

Declaration

Father, thank you for the gifts that your Spirit makes available to us to touch the lives of people around us.

Thank you for the gifts of influence – the gift of prophecy, tongues and interpretation of tongues (1 Corinthians 12.10).

Thank you for gifts of impact – the gift of faith, healings and miracles (1 Corinthians 12.9-10).

And thank you for gifts of insight – (1 Corinthians 12.8,10).

We will honour the Holy Spirit by opening our lives to these gifts.

And we will eagerly desire these gifts, especially the gift of prophecy, so that the lives of those around us might be touched by your love and power (1 Corinthians 14.3).

Amen.

Gifts

Study 3: Communicating what God is saying

“Thus saith the Lord...”. It’s very hard to argue with a statement as strong as that. After all, you might just find yourself arguing with God!

How we use spiritual gifts is an incredibly important subject. It was just as important a subject in the early church. Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 12.1-3 indicate that there was a real danger that people would promote false teaching under the guise of spiritual gifts.

1 Thessalonians 5.20-22 says:

“Do not treat prophecies with contempt 21 but test them all; hold on to what is good, 22 reject every kind of evil.”

So this is not a problem that is just related to our own time. It’s been around since the earliest days of the church. What and how we communicate what we believe God is saying is very important if we want to use our gifts effectively.

In this study we are going to look at three components that are relevant and important in communicating what we believe is a message from God.

The Message

First of all, any communication that we claim is from God should be consistent with the *Word of God* and the *character of God*.

The Word of God

In 1 Corinthians 12.1-3, mentioned above, Paul begins his teaching on spiritual gifts with the statement that no-one who claims to be speaking from God can say *“Jesus be cursed”*.

Whatever Paul was addressing in the church at Corinth, one thing is clear: the Holy Spirit does not contradict sound teaching. He does not contradict the written Word of God that we have in the Bible.

Gifts

Any kind of prophetic speech or word that contradicts what the Bible clearly teaches should be rejected. The Bible is the Word of God for all people for all time. Prophecy is a word from God for a specific group of people at a specific time.

The character of God

Sometimes we can hear prophetic words that aren't obviously unscriptural. They might even be filled with biblical language. Yet somehow they leave us feeling uneasy. This way well be the gift of *distinguishing between spirits* kicking in.

But why might such words have such negative impact? Especially if they are based on Bible verses?

Sadly, sometimes people twist scriptures to serve their own agenda. Such words might seem to be based on the Word of God, but they do not reflect the *character of God*.

Words heavy on judgement and God's anger do not reflect the heart and character of God. And they don't measure up to the criteria or characteristics of genuine prophecy set out in 1 Corinthians 14.3:

"But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort."

So it's always worth applying those two tests to prophetic words:

Are they scriptural?

Do they reflect the character of God?

The message communicated in any spiritual gift should reflect the *Word of God* and the *character of God*.

Gifts

Mode

A second important aspect of communicating what we believe God has given us is the *mode of communication*. That means the *way in which we communicate* what we believe God has given us.

In 1 Corinthians 14.6-17, Paul contrasts the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy.

His main point is to do with *effectively communicating what God wants to say*.

There are a number of things that we can learn from this passage about delivering spiritual gifts, especially spoken gifts like prophecy.

Clarity

Firstly, our communication should be *clear*:

“Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes?” (1 Corinthians 14.7)

Anyone can strum the strings of a harp and make a “harp” noise. It’s only when you play different notes in some kind of order that you make a tune. And most of us can tell the difference between a strummer and a player!

When prophetic words are delivered in Elizabethan English, they are not always clear. Prophetic words based on obscure scriptures are not clear. Prophetic words that have more than one theme are not clear. Prophetic “strumming” is all too common!

Brevity

Secondly, prophetic words should be clear and *brief*:

“Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?” (1 Corinthians 14.8)

The clear call of a trumpet summoning troops to battle was a brief call. It wasn’t a trumpet concerto!

Gifts

Long drawn out prophetic words become boring. And people forget the point. After a while people just turn off when there is a prophetic word.

Some prophetic words are lengthened by *unnecessary padding*. The tendency to explain how one received the word is unnecessary. You don't need to tell the story of how you were in Tesco's and you met someone who told you a story and you felt God was saying!

Long Bible readings before sharing the prophetic word are also unnecessary. It's a prophecy not a Bible study!

Some of the above happens because sometimes prophecy gets reduced to a mini teaching or a testimony.

Intelligibility

Thirdly, prophetic words should be *intelligible*. The hearers should be able to understand what is being said. This relates back to clarity:

"So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air." (1 Corinthians 14.9)

One of the strangest things that has developed in some Christian circles is the idea that the more spiritual you become, the weirder you become.

Strange sayings, indecipherable pictures and visions, words that don't make sense are sometimes considered "deep". They are not. They are just unclear and unintelligible. They don't communicate anything except confusion and uncertainty.

People in the early church who thought they were deep because of their revelations, were usually people who had lost their way spiritually (Colossians 2.18-19; Revelation 2.24). They had become *puffed up* (1 Corinthians 8.1-3).

Manner

A third vital aspect in using spiritual gifts is our *manner*. James explains what true spiritual wisdom looks like:

Gifts

“But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”
(James 2.17)

Unfortunately, spiritual gifts are sometimes used in a way that is harsh or aggressive. In the verse above, James says that something that is from God has very different characteristics.

1 Corinthians 14.26-33 has much to say about the *manner* in which we use spiritual gifts. In these verses Paul sets out a kind of protocol for spiritual gifts.

It should be said that the *context* in which spiritual gifts are shared is a little different to many church contexts today. It probably wasn't a group of more than fifty or so people. And it probably wasn't as small as what we would consider a small group / connect group of say ten or twelve people. Many of the early churches met in homes – probably large homes.

It's noticeable in Acts that most of the ministry in public meetings was done by the apostles. There was no space for the kind of thing we see in 1 Corinthians 14.26 where theoretically everyone shared.

This was an environment where people could ask questions about what had been said (29).

In our context a small group or connect group or even a number of groups getting together, is the most appropriate environment for using spiritual gifts, especially tongues, interpretation and prophecy. The other gifts we have looked at (faith, healings, miracles, wisdom, knowledge and discernment) can function anywhere. They don't need a defined context as much as tongues, interpretation and prophecy.

So what can we learn from 1 Corinthians 14.26-33 about the *manner* of our communication?

Order

First of all, recognise that there is an *order* to how things should be done. *Order* is not the opposite of *freedom*. *Order* is the opposite of *chaos*.

Gifts

“For God is not a God of disorder but of peace – as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people.” (1 Corinthians 14.33)

Two or at the most three tongues and interpretations and prophecies:

“If anyone speaks in a tongue, two – or at the most three – should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. 28 If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God. 29 Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said” (27,29).

Openness

Secondly, we need to be open to questions and correction:

“Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said” (29)

We need to be open to questions about what has been said.

Avoid phrases like *“Thus says the Lord”*. Phrases like that shut down any questions and indicate that you are not very teachable.

Opportunities for others

Thirdly, allow others to participate.

“30 And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop” (30)

It’s important to give *opportunity for others* to participate. Nothing kills a meeting like someone trying to dominate it and have the final word on everything.

An obligation for ourselves

I’m sure you have heard people say something like *“I just had to say that”*. The truth is they didn’t just have to say it. Why? Because we are in control of what we say:

“The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.” (1 Corinthians 14.32)

Gifts

We remain in control of what we say and do. And we're supposed to be because *God is not the God of disorder, but of peace (33)*.

Conclusion

Spiritual gifts – especially the spoken gifts – work best when the message is consistent with the Word and character of God. They work best when the mode is clear, brief and intelligible. And when our manner follows the protocols of 1 Corinthians 14.26-33.

For reflection

What do you believe God is saying to you through this study?

Why do you think it is important that prophetic messages don't contradict the Word of God or the character of God?

How important is it that words that we share are *clear, brief* and *easy to understand*?

Why is the *manner* in which a prophetic word is delivered important?

How can we help each other to use our gifts in a way that builds everyone up?

Gifts

Declaration

Thank you, Father, that you entrust us with words that can bring encouragement and comfort to others (1 Corinthians 14.3).

We pray that our words would always be words that build up others.

We pray that what we share would reflect both your written word and your character (1 Corinthians 12.1-3)

Give us words that we can share briefly, clearly and in ways that others will understand (1 Corinthians 14.7-9).

God, we recognise that you are a God of order (1 Corinthians 14.33). We will be open to questions and correction (1 Corinthians 14.29). And we will allow opportunities for others to contribute (1 Corinthians 14.30). By your grace we will control our own spirits (1 Corinthians 14.32).

Thank you for the gifts that you give us. Help us to retain the kind of humble spirit that receives and imparts the kind of wisdom that comes from heaven (James 2.17)

Gifts

Study 4: Growing in gifts

Growing in gifts

Sometimes spiritual gifts are taught or thought about in such a way that gives the impression that we have very little influence over the gifts God gives us.

But nothing could be further from the truth. As we have seen in previous studies, we have a responsibility not only to use the gifts God has given us, but to use them in a way that reflects His heart.

In this study we are going to look at our whole approach to gifts and how we can grow in spiritual gifts.

Desiring the gifts

You might have heard people say things like “We should desire the giver of the gifts and not the gifts themselves”. The implication is that we should desire to deepen our relationship with God rather than chase after His gifts.

There is some truth in that. Of course, the Giver is more important than the gifts. However, that is not the whole story. Jesus said that God is a good Father who gives good gifts, specifically the Holy Spirit (Matthew 7.9-11; Luke 11.11-13).

In 1 Corinthians 12.31 and 14.1, Paul explicitly states that we should *desire gifts*:

“Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.” (12.31)

“Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.” (14.1)

Paul states clearly that we should not just seek the *Giver* of the gifts but the *gifts themselves*.

He qualifies this by saying that we should seek *the greater gifts* (12.31).

And then in 14.1, he says that we should seek gifts of the Spirit *especially prophecy*.

Gifts

Why does he specify *greater gifts* and *prophecy*?

He doesn't directly explain why. It's probably to do with the ability certain gifts have to build up the church. He makes that point in verse 12 of chapter 14. He talks about *gifts that build up the church*.

Those gifts are considered *greater* because of what they can accomplish. *Prophecy* has, as we saw in study 2, the power to bring a godly influence to people and situations. So that's probably why Paul wants us to seek that gift.

Receiving gifts – laying on of hands

Paul doesn't say anything about how we *receive* spiritual gifts.

In fact, the New Testament doesn't say much about *receiving* spiritual gifts.

In Acts, people were filled with the Spirit, often through the apostles laying their hands on them (Acts 8; 19). But sometimes they were filled with the Spirit without anyone laying hands on them.

This was the case in Acts 10 when the people in Cornelius' household were filled with the Spirit and spoke in tongues without anyone laying hands on them. It was the same on the day of Pentecost. They all spoke in tongues when the Spirit fell on them.

Timothy received a spiritual gift through the laying on of Paul's hands (2 Timothy 1.6). And Timothy received a *gift* when the elders laid their hands on him (1 Timothy 4.14).

Laying on of hands can therefore be a way in which a gift is received.

Receiving gifts – faith

It probably goes without saying that you need *a measure of faith* to operate any spiritual gift.

Faith is singled out in Galatians 3 as the key factor in receiving the Spirit and in seeing the miraculous at work:

"2 I would like to learn just one thing from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? 3 Are you so foolish? After

Gifts

beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?" (Galatians 3.2-3)

Laying on of hands is no substitute for *faith*. *Faith* gives us the confidence and boldness to speak out.

We don't receive the gifts of the Spirit by being passive. We have to actively desire them.

Developing gifts

If the gifts of the Spirit are gifts of the *Spirit* and have a divine origin, how can we develop them?

It's a good question! And if Paul hadn't made one particular statement, I don't think we could talk about *developing* gifts.

Listen to what he says in 1 Corinthians 14.12:

"Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church."

He doesn't say *how to excel*, he just says *try to excel*.

Since he doesn't explain how to do this, it's safe to say that we excel in gifts the way we excel in other areas of our faith, through, for example, prayer, listening to God, fellowship, giving and receiving encouragement, reading the Bible, exercising faith.

The main point is that we *can* develop our gifts. We *can excel in spiritual gifts*.

And if you are serious about receiving and developing gifts, *put yourself in a context where you can use them*. Connect groups or other small group / prayer group settings are the best environments for using gifts.

Gifts

Following love

1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most famous chapters in the whole of the Bible. It's a chapter that is often read at weddings. It's the *love* chapter.

It seems that Paul talks about gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 and then again in 1 Corinthians 14, but in chapter 13, he changes subject entirely.

That's how it *seems*.

In reality, 1 Corinthians 13 is as much to do with spiritual gifts as the other two chapters.

The Corinthian church was big on power and small on love. The result was that even though it was an incredibly gifted church, it was an incredibly damaged church. If you read through 1 and 2 Corinthians, you'll find issue after issue that Paul has to address.

Power without love is incredibly destructive.

You can have amazing gifts, but *without love* they are worthless:

"If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing." (1 Corinthians 13.1-3)

Even the greatest of the gifts will fail, but *love never fails*:

"8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away." (1 Corinthians 13.8)

And if you want to know what it looks like to *follow the way of love*, he sets it out clearly:

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the

Gifts

truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” (1 Corinthians 13.4-7)

Paul wanted the Corinthians to desire spiritual gifts, but he wanted them also to *follow the way of love:*

“Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.” (1 Corinthians 14.1)

If we *follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts* we have a powerful combination that will unlock God’s blessing over the lives of people, churches and communities.

For reflection

What do you think God is saying to you through this study?

How can knowing that God is a good God who gives good gifts help us to receive spiritual gifts?

How can we help each other to develop our gifts?

What is the most difficult thing you find about receiving or using gifts? How can that be overcome?

Gifts

Why is love so important?

How can we *follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts?*

Gifts

Declaration

Father, thank you that you are a good Father who gives us good gifts (Matthew 7.9-11). And you want us to desire those gifts (1 Corinthians 14.1).

We will seek that gifts that the Holy Spirit has made available to us. We will desire the greater gifts (1 Corinthians 12.31) especially the gift of prophecy (1 Corinthians 14.1).

And by your grace we will seek to excel in gifts that build up your church (1 Corinthians 14.12).

Help us to be faithful in finding those places where we might use the gifts you have given us to build up others.

We will follow the way of love, the most excellent way (1 Corinthians 12.31).

We recognise that gifts without love are worthless (1 Corinthians 13.1-3).

We will follow the way of love, because love never fails (1 Corinthians 13.8).

By your grace we will follow the way of love *and* we will eagerly desire spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14.1). Amen.

Gifts

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Gifts

