



## Concerning Spiritual Things

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Fr. William Klock

October 18, 2009 – St. Luke

Throughout 1 Corinthians, we St. Paul trying to draw together a group of people that had split into factions – over preachers, over doctrine and ethics, and last week we saw how they were even using their social distinctions to cause divisions at the Lord’s Supper – the one event that was supposed to be symbolic of their *unity* in Christ. In every instance Paul brings their focus back to the cross and back to Jesus as our source of life, and because of that, our source of unity.

We’re going to see more of the same this morning as we look at the first part of Chapter 12. There are still *more* divisions. In this case it’s over a mixed up view of our life in the Spirit. We’ve seen before how there was one party in Corinth that basically saw the Resurrection as already having happened for *some* of them in some sort of spiritual sense. They thought they had arrived at the pinnacle of life in the Spirit and Christian maturity. In fact, from the way Paul addresses them, we can see that they had adopted a party label: they were the “Spirituals”. It went so far that they were even rejecting the Apostle Paul himself, because they didn’t think he had achieved their level of spiritual maturity. From Paul’s argumentation we can tell that they were elevating tongues above the other gifts, maybe even as some do today, as *the* indicator of whether or not you had what they had. But Paul’s argumentation also shows that a second group developed in response, and they addressed the error by throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. There are some amazing parallels between the Corinthian divisions and our modern divisions between the “Charismatic” and “Non-Charismatic” parties that have come about in the last century.

Look at Chapter 12:1-3:

**Now concerning spiritual gifts** [Literally, not “gifts”, but “spirituals” or “spiritual things” – he throws their party title, “Spirituals”, back at them.], **brothers, I**

**do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.**

It’s not just *gifts* of the Spirit that he’s talking about – it’s the broader sense of *life* in the Spirit. The “gifts” are just one part of that life. Verse 3 is aimed right into the heart of their division. Paul says, “If you want to know who has the Spirit, look for the people who are proclaiming Jesus as Lord.” Paul reminds us over and over that the natural man or woman is at enmity with God – they have all sorts of “lords”, but none of them is Jesus. In verse 2 he appealed to their own past to remind them that the natural man or woman will *never* make or proclaim Jesus Christ to be their Lord. Fallen humanity universally submits to the lordship of sin and death and Satan – to any lordship *other than* that of the true Saviour. It’s *only* by the Spirit’s power working in us that anyone can make Jesus Christ their Lord.

He says in Romans 8:9: “You...are not in the flesh but *in the Spirit*, if in fact the Spirit of God *dwells* in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” Paul’s saying here, “If you want to know if someone is ‘Spiritual’; (a few verses later he picks up John the Baptists imagery of baptism by the Spirit) if you want to know who’s been baptised by the Spirit; don’t look for experiences; don’t look for this gift or that gift; look for their profession. Have they made Jesus Christ their Lord? There’s only one way someone can make Jesus their Lord and it’s by the indwelling of the Spirit. It’s the indwelling Spirit who unites us to Christ and knits us together into his body. Paul again takes us back to the cross – because that’s what the Holy Spirit always does. The Spirit *never* points to himself; the Spirit’s ministry is always to point us to the cross – to point us to *Jesus*.

The Spirit always brings unity, but they were putting the Spirit in a box and saying that he had to work *in this* way – and in doing that they were creating divisions in the body. So Paul opens up that box, takes the Spirit out and stresses: “You *all* have him. In fact, the evidence that you all have him is that you all have made Jesus your Lord. You can’t do that

without the Spirit indwelling you – baptising you all into the one body. The Spirit never allows for two classes of believers. The Church is *one!*

And yet in the midst of that profound *unity*, the Spirit still creates a beautiful *diversity*. Paul gets into this in the second half of the chapter with the body image. We’ll look at that next week. But here, he addresses how some of them were hung up on certain gifts as being more important or more significant than others, so he says in verses 4 to 6:

**Now there are *varieties* of gifts, but the same Spirit;  
and there are *varieties* of service, but the same Lord;  
and there are *varieties* of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.**

First, the source of the gifts is God. In fact, as Paul puts it here, even though the *means* may be the Holy Spirit, the fact is that each person of the Trinity is active in not only redeeming us, but in giving us new life and in empowering us.

But second, when it comes to the gifts of the Spirit, there’s glorious variety. In just these three verses, he describes them as “gifts”, as “service”, and as “activities” or “works”. There’s no single term in the New Testament used to describe gifts of the Spirit. The most common one and the one we’re all probably most familiar with is the one translated “gifts” in the first part of verse 4. It’s the Greek word *charismata*. That word itself actually has nothing directly to with the Holy Spirit. *Charis* is the Greek word for “grace” and that’s what these gifts are all about: grace. Paul deliberately changes from “spiritual things” to “grace things” to emphasise to these people who thought they were spiritually superior that all these things are products of God’s grace. That’s why Paul says over and over that we don’t *earn* them and we don’t demand them from God, but that he gives them *graciously* to whom he pleases. And being rooted in grace they have a wide variety. In fact, when Paul says those familiar words in Romans 6:23: “The free *gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” He uses that same word *charisma* to describe the gift of life. Everything God gives us as part of our new birth in Christ is a “grace gift” given through his Holy Spirit, and so it’s no wonder that there’s this amazing variety.

This is also why we have to be careful as Christians making party labels out this. About a half-century ago the party label “Charismatic” popped up. It’s silly and offensive, because as Paul’s stressing here, there’s *no such thing* as a non-Charismatic Christian. Every Christian is a recipient not only of God’s initial grace-gift of new birth and eternal life, but every one of us is also graciously gifted for service in the Kingdom. The label “Charismatic” today is just like the label “Spiritual” was in Corinth. It’s something that takes what God gave to make us *one*, and uses it to divide and make unwarranted distinctions within the body.

Because these are gifts of grace, no one has any business lording it over a brother or sister that they have a particular gift that someone else doesn’t have. Again, these are *gifts of grace*. They’re not rewards for attaining a certain level of spiritual maturity and none is more to be praised than another. Our problem is that we’re often prone to seeing the miraculous and more spectacular gifts as being more important or more impressive. But Paul flattens all those distinctions. The gifts are different, they operate differently, some are miraculous and some are non-miraculous, but they all come from God, they’re all the product of his grace, and as we’ll see, he gives each one for a reason as he says in verse 7:

**To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.**

First, who receives the gifts? “Each.” Everyone does. Not “everyone who asks.” Not “everyone who aspires to them.” Not “everyone who achieves a certain level of maturity in the faith.” We have to go back to verse 3: Everyone whom the Spirit has indwelt so that he can proclaim Jesus as his Lord is gifted by that same Holy Spirit. That’s why Paul never tells us to look to the gifts as evidence of faith or maturity. He always calls us to look for a true profession of the Lordship of Christ backed up by the fruit of the Spirit. Gifts can be faked or counterfeited. Fruit can’t.

And second, why are these gifts given? They’re not for personal aggrandisement – not for our own personal benefit or for one person to lord his abilities over those of another. Paul says the gifts are given for our “*common good*” as the body of Christ.

Now some have taken that to mean that all the gifts *must* be used publicly and not privately – especially applying that to tongues. I used to take that position, but in studying this passage and the ones related to it, it’s clear that not every gift has a clear public manifestation. Remember when Paul talked about marriage and celibacy back in Chapter 7? He described both of those as gifts from God – in fact, he describes them specifically as *charismata*. Marriage and celibacy are gifts of the Spirit too and it’s hard to see them as gifts to be used in public the same way something like prophecy would be used – and yet both are gifts that serve the common good of the body. So we have to grant that in this broad spectrum of spiritual gifts, there are some that don’t have a clear or consistently public use and yet they still serve the body as long as we aren’t abusing them for our own benefit.

In verses 8 to 11 Paul lists *some* of the gifts. I stress “some” because we have to grant that the list isn’t exhaustive. There’s more than one list of spiritual gifts in the New Testament. Paul will list many of the same gifts again later in the chapter, but the list isn’t the same. There are differing lists in Romans 12 and Ephesians 4. Peter, in his first epistle, simply lists two categories: gifts of speaking and gifts of service. Every list is different. Some of the gifts overlap each other, some gifts are combinations of several others, some are natural and some are supernatural and some are a combination of the two, and what becomes obvious is that each list is representative and illustrates how the Spirit works *differently* with each of us. Again, Paul busts the Spirit out of the box the Corinthians had put him in and it should caution us not to force him back into a box of our own making.

The only common thing between the different lists is that tongues (and their interpretation when it’s included) always comes last in the list. Some have taken that to argue that tongues is the least of the gifts. That’s reading something in that’s not there and it’s missing the context. In each instance, Paul was addressing a group that was abusing tongues and elevating it to be *the* gift, and it’s clear that Paul puts it last in the list just to make the point that it’s *one* of the gifts, but no better or more significant and no more

evidence of the indwelling Spirit than any of these other manifestations.

I want to look now at the specific gifts Paul lists in 8 to 11, but as we go through the list, take notice of how Paul introduces them: “to one is given” and “to another” and “to another” and “to another”. Notice: nobody gets them all, but everybody gets something. The other thing that needs to be said is that quite a few of these gifts are only ever mentioned once or twice in the New Testament, some are described with ambiguous language, and never described in detail, so we need to be careful about coming to dogmatic conclusions about exactly what they are. What becomes clear is that Paul intends these lists to give us an idea of the *diversity* of how the Spirit works – and then to leave the specifics open to the Spirit. If we don’t understand one of these gifts perfectly, it’s not a big deal, because the Spirit will manifest himself as he pleases.

If we’re prone to being overly critical about a particular manifestation of a gift, we first need to go back to verse 3 and ask: Has this person made Jesus his or her Lord? If the answer is “Yes”, then our first assumption should be that what we’re seeing is a legitimate manifestation of the Spirit. It doesn’t mean that mistakes won’t be made or that gifts sometimes don’t need to be regulated or that we shouldn’t be discerning – Paul gets into that in Chapter 14 – but if we’re *first and foremost* suspicious about these things, it’s an indicator that we’re missing the point.

**For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit...**

The Spirit works to give some special understanding of wisdom and knowledge. As we’ve seen in 1 Corinthians, wisdom and knowledge are interchangeable for Paul, but they refer to our understanding of the truth of God and our ability to apply it. In some cases the Spirit may give us wisdom and knowledge through personal revelation, but he also commonly grants them as he works through our reason and intellect too.

**...to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles...**

The Spirit gives us all faith, and yet here Paul is talking about something greater than “ordinary” saving faith. Faith is believing God, believing he means what he says and then acting on it. But this is something that’s always characteristic of the gifts of the Spirit: Each is an increased expression in an often unusual way of what every Christian is expected to do. We are all to live by faith, but there is a gift of faith too. We should all help each other, but there is a gift of extraordinary helps. We should all give from our abundance, but there’s also a gift of extraordinary giving. We are all called to show mercy, but there’s also a gift that shows extraordinary mercy too.

When it comes to faith I can’t help but think of Cameron Townsend, the founder of Wycliffe Translators. I was reading this week how when he heard about the many people groups in the Soviet Union who had never had a Bible in their language, he decided to go there and start new translations projects. People told him he was crazy and that it was impossible. But he had a gift of faith and he did it anyway and the amazing result was that in short order he had teams of Russian atheist linguists translating St. John’s Gospel!

Gifts of healing and miracles are a natural outgrowth of faith and, in the case of healing, of the spiritual healing that comes through the saving power of the Gospel. The New Testament gives us story after story of the Spirit working through Jesus and the apostles to heal not only the spirit, but the body and mind – and often doing so as evidence that validated Jesus’ claim to be the Saviour. That was the purpose behind the other miracles worked in the New Testament too. They were the proof that the message of the Gospel was truly from God. And so it’s not surprising that Paul links faith and healing here.

### **...to another prophecy...**

Again, every one of us is granted a measure of spiritual understanding as a result of the Holy Spirit living in us. It’s the Spirit who draws us to Christ and it’s the Spirit who opens the Scriptures fully before us, and yet for some he does the same in a more profound way. The New Testament is full of examples of how he does this, sometimes through direct verbal

revelation, sometimes through a feeling, sometimes in a vision or a dream. Prophecy is a broad category that overlaps with a lot of the others, like wisdom and knowledge and even faith – and as we see in Chapter 14, when the gifts of tongues and interpretation are used in public, they equate with prophecy.

### **...to another the ability to distinguish between spirits...**

To distinguish between that which comes from God and that which doesn’t – sometimes by direct supernatural revelation, but often just as validly by means of our Spirit-inspired reason and being firmly grounded in the truths of God in Scripture. Again, this is just a more extraordinary manifestation of the discernment *every* Christian is called to exercise.

### **And finally: ...to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.**

“Tongues” is a King Jamesism that has stuck in the English language. Literally, it’s just “languages”. Tongues is the ability, as on Pentecost, to speak in a real language you have never learned and don’t know, and for some people, the ability to interpret that spoken language even though they too haven’t learned it. We’ll get into this more in Chapter 14 where Paul deals with it more specifically.

Finally, St. Paul writes in verse 11:

### **All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.**

Again, Paul stresses the unity we have in the Spirit. We have different gifts, but they’re given for a common purpose and for the common good of the body of Christ. And because the Spirit knows each of us better than we even know ourselves, he distributes the gifts where they have the best fit and where they’ll be best used. He knows what ministry each of us is to have within the body and he sovereignly equips us for those ministries – which also means that different people may have different gifts at different times as they need that specific equipping.

In verse 31 Paul says, “earnestly desire the higher gifts.” – earnestly desire to increase

your activity and ministry in the Kingdom of God and the expectation is that as we seek to do more for God, he will equip us as we need. God is sovereign and yet we’re responsible too. Think about the fact that Paul describes salvation itself as *charisma* – as a spiritual gift – and yet salvation is something sovereignly given in line with God’s elective purposes, but the Scriptures also call on us to earnestly seek after it. The same goes with other gifts of the Spirit. Yes, God is the sovereign giver, but we still have a duty to seek what he gives. Paul calls us to seek after the best – after being equipped for ministry – but at the same time he’s warning us that we can never make any one gift the test of whether or not the Spirit is present or active. Again, that test falls back to our profession and our fruit.

Brothers and sisters, make it your life’s work to pursue ministry and service in the kingdom of God, and trust him equip you with every good gift you need. Start by looking for places to serve where you can use the gifts that he, in his wisdom, has already given you, but don’t be afraid to stretch your spiritual muscles to see if God won’t equip you for new areas of ministry too. I want to leave you with St. Paul’s wise advice to St. Timothy, his young son in the faith. Paul wrote to him: “Fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you” (2 Timothy 1:6). Fan into flame the gifts that the Spirit has given you and you’ll see God at work.

Please pray with me: Father, thank you for the amazing provision of these gracious gifts of your Spirit that equip us for ministry and service. Show us how and where to put our gifts into action that we might not squander them. Keep us always mindful of their source in you, that we might never abuse them for personal gain or make them a reason to be prideful. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, the one who has baptised each one of us by his Spirit and made us one. Amen.