

Gifts with Purpose

First Week of Advent 2018

Week 13 in Our Weekly Study of

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

Orchard Park Wesleyan Church

Week of December 2, 2018

Introduction

Can you believe it's December already? As we prepare for Christmas, many of us are thinking about gifts, and I love Pastor Dan's choice to reserve this chapter of 1 Corinthians for the first week of Advent. This week, as we work through 1 Corinthians 12 together, we'll be studying the gifts that God gives each one of us through His Spirit. I am excited for what God will teach us this week, and I am praying that as we come to a deeper understanding of what He has so generously given to each one of us, we'll embrace these gifts with thanksgiving and awe and will use them in the powerful ways that God intends.

Paul talks about the spiritual gifts in several places throughout the New Testament. Although the gifts are an important part of every believer's life and ministry, I think many of us have difficulty understanding them. Their very nature as being given by the Holy Spirit lends itself to mystery, and because Paul talks about them in so many different letters—none of which provides a comprehensive list or description of all the gifts—coming to a good understanding can be a challenge. Each of us must commit to seeking the Lord concerning our spiritual gifts in order to discover just what He has given to us. Some of you have already sought the Lord and are faithfully using what He has given you. In fact, I see so many in our church who serve tirelessly, joyfully, and with incredible talent. Praise God, and *thank you*.

For those of you who don't yet know what the Holy Spirit has given you—or perhaps you're aware

of the gift but don't know how to begin using it—I hope you'll take some time this week to intentionally discover what God has for you. As always, my prayer is, regardless of where we are with God now, that He will reveal Himself more to all of us, take us deeper in our pursuit of Him, and fuel the intensity of our passion for Him. Before we begin the bulk of our study, let's get a little context for Paul's discussion in this chapter.

You'll notice as you start reading in chapter 12 that Paul begins with the phrase, "Now...regarding" again. He is—as in chapters 7, 8, and 16—addressing a specific question that the Corinthian church raised in their previous letter to him. Concerning spiritual gifts, then, Paul was not rebuking a serious error in the church. This isn't to say that the church had no error; they certainly had some mistakes in their thinking concerning the spiritual gifts. Scholars agree that this church was likely elevating those who had gifts that manifested in an obvious and showy way (particularly, speaking in tongues) while creating a feeling of inferiority among those believers with seemingly more modest gifts. But nonetheless, the church's misunderstanding of the spiritual gifts was not so detrimental that Paul needed to caustically set them straight.

In fact, Paul begins with a bit of fatherly reassurance in verses one and two. Because of their pagan heritage, some in the church may have been worried about what was actually being said by the one who spoke in tongues—and so Paul reassures them that since the Holy Spirit is One who empowers that gift (and all spiritual gifts), nothing would be said that wouldn't honor Jesus as Lord. In verse 3 then, he draws attention to the Spirit again but in a way that begins to correct the church's mistaken degradation of those with less obvious displays of the Holy Spirit's gifts. He introduces the main theme of the chapter—unity in diversity.

With all of this in mind, let's begin studying together. We'll be referring to Romans 12 and Ephesians 4 throughout the week, too, since these are the other main parts of scripture that teach us about spiritual gifts.

Day 1

Gifted

*"Now, dear brothers and sisters, regarding your question about the special abilities the Spirit gives us. I don't want you to misunderstand this."
1 Corinthians 12:1 NLT*

I think I said more than enough in the introduction! So let's dive right in to 1 Corinthians 12.

Please read 1 Corinthians 12:1-3, 11.

- From whom do spiritual gifts come?

I asked you such an obvious question because the point here is so apparent that we might unintentionally skip right over it and seriously miss out. Spiritual gifts are just that; they are *gifts* that are *given*. They are not attained, earned, or even deserved. Rather, the Holy Spirit, who is the Giver, decides to whom He wants to give which gifts and then gives as it pleases Him.

Why is this simple truth the focus of our study today? Because, much like the Corinthian church, we have the tendency—simply because we are human—to compare ourselves to each other based on the spiritual gifts God gives us, and this does a world of harm to the body of Christ. We may look at a brother or sister with a seemingly disproportionate heap of spiritual gifts and consider that he or she is more favored than we are.

Conversely, we might think, as some in the Corinthian church did, that we have a more important spiritual gift and should therefore be elevated above others with “lesser” gifts.

However, as we’ll study in a few days, spiritual gifts are given to each one of us in order to further bless *each other*. We are each given work to do in God’s Kingdom. We’ve talked a lot about spreading the Gospel to the lost, but this week we’re primarily going to focus on our work with each other because Christ wants His church to build each other up. This doesn’t mean that we set aside our job of evangelizing; in fact, only when the church is healthy and thriving can it effectively minister to those who need salvation and restoration.

The gifts that each of us receives through the Holy Spirit are meant to help us in the work of building up a healthy church body. However, when we mistakenly try to appropriate our gifts as something we attained; when we assume that we somehow had a hand in our own gifting; then we open the floodgates to boasting and self-righteousness, jealousy, and competition within the church. Instead of obediently yielding to the Holy Spirit’s power and using our gift(s), we can decide to focus on how many and what kind of gifts our brothers and sisters received, essentially throwing our own by the wayside in a spirit of ingratitude and entitlement. How tragic for God’s people, and what an insult to the Giver of all good gifts.

So that we can joyfully and fully use the gifts God has given us, let’s understand a few important truths:

Please read Romans 12:3-6, and Ephesians 3:2-10, 4:7.

We’ve already established that the Holy Spirit, as the One who gives the gifts, has the authority to distribute as He pleases. The type and amount of gifts each of us receives will differ because our callings and responsibilities—given according to differing measures of Christ’s grace—differ.

- Please fill in the blanks for Ephesians 4:7 and Romans 12:6. Both are written below in the ESV translation.

“But _____ was _____ to each one of us according to the _____ of Christ’s _____.”
(Ephesians 4:7 ESV)

“Having _____ that differ according to the _____ _____ to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to _____ our faith;” (Romans 12:6 ESV)

I used the ESV translation because the continuity of the word “grace” is helpful to our understanding. God gives each of us the same grace in Christ for salvation. But Christ calls each one of us to serve Him in different ways, and He hands out different measures of His grace in the gifts that equip us for that calling. We see this explained beautifully in Ephesians 3:2-10. We’re going to break this down together.

- Of what did God give Paul stewardship (v. 2)?
- How did Paul receive this special understanding (v. 3)?
- From whom (v.5)?
- To whom else was it revealed (v. 5)?
- This was given according to God’s _____.
- For what calling and purpose (v.7)?

Understanding that the gifts we receive are given in order to help us accomplish the task we’ve been called to do helps refocus our attention from ourselves and what we *have* to Christ and the purpose for which He’s given it. Just as salvation through God’s grace in Christ was given so that no one could boast, so our spiritual gifts being given through Christ’s grace and the Spirit’s decision eliminate any right to or cause for boasting among God’s people. We have done nothing to earn or deserve what God gives us; He has simply, by His grace and generosity in Christ Jesus, freely given good things that He intends for us to use to help others in the body of Christ. There is purpose in the gift, and that should be our focus rather than on the gift itself.

Let’s conclude with one final thought. Romans 12:3 tells us not to think more highly of ourselves that

we should think—but to honestly and realistically assess ourselves according to what God has given us. Let's let this self-assessment start to roll around in our minds. We'll come back to it at the end of the week.

Consider: How do you feel about the gifts God has given you through His Spirit? Have you considered them before? Do you notice gifts in others? How do you feel about those? Have you found yourself comparing what you have been given to what others have? How do you lean—toward thinking yours are more valuable? Or do you sometimes feel like maybe you've been slighted or altogether forgotten? How does this reminder that God reserves the right to give as He pleases—and that He gives according to what He calls you to do—affect how you think about your gifts and others' gifts?

Pray: First, thank God that He has given you gifts! Even if you don't know what they are yet, you can rest assured that He has given you a gift that is empowered by His own Spirit. Ask God to help you recognize and use the gifts that He's given you to complete the work He has called you to do. Ask Him to begin speaking to your heart and through His Word concerning your gift and your calling.

Day 2

Same...Different...Same

*"There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all."
1 Corinthians 12:4 NLT*

Today we're going to spend some time studying the main theme of this particular chapter: unity in diversity. We spend a lot of time talking about unity in God's Kingdom, and rightfully so. God wants His people to unite in love and purpose under His Son's headship. Paul repeatedly writes to his churches about uniting in the Spirit. Unity is an important part of our faith. However, by definition, unity cannot exist unless there are separate and distinct parts that come together to form the whole. Diversity is an important part of a unified body, and it is a beautiful characteristic of Christ's Kingdom.

Please read 1 Corinthians 12:4-20 and Ephesians 4:1-6.

- Please identify the following, according to our readings:

⇒ 1 Cor. 12:4— Different _____ / same _____

⇒ 1 Cor. 12:5—Different _____ / same _____

⇒ 1 Cor. 12:6—Different _____ / same _____

⇒ 1 Cor. 12:12, 20—Many _____ / one _____

⇒ Eph. 4:4—One _____, one _____, one _____

⇒ Eph. 4:5—One _____, one _____, one _____

⇒ Eph. 4:6—One _____ and _____

⇒ Eph. 4:7—“*However*, he has given _____ a _____ gift”

The first three sets of blanks you filled in according to 1 Corinthians identify different gifts, service, and work all coming from the same Spirit, Lord, and God. This should immediately call to mind for us the complete unity of the Holy Trinity. Father, Son, and Spirit are three distinct Persons who fulfill different roles, but together, they are the One and Only God. We can't even attempt to study the intricate beauty of the Trinity now, but let it suffice for us to understand today that our model for unity in the Body of Christ is that of God Himself. He loves creativity and individuality; He created those in us. But He calls us to come together under His Son's authority so that Christ may be glorified. Let's study a little more how this is accomplished within the Body of Christ.

- List the spiritual gifts you see mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10

- List any additional you find in Romans 12.

- In your own words, write out the analogy Paul makes concerning a body and its parts to Christ and His church.

Diversity in unity is effective. As we studied yesterday, we are each given different spiritual gifts in order to help us fulfill the individual responsibilities to which Christ calls us. Even those of us with the same gifts and area of service are assigned different tasks and activities within those areas. Why? Simply put, because if we all had all the same responsibility, nothing would get done! We complement each other. God calls us to different activities because He is the only One who sees the entire picture and who can accomplish everything. He delegates to His people accordingly. This releases us from the responsibility of trying to save the entire world or serve every need. *God* is the One in charge of that; we simply work where and how He tells us to. Amen!!

The union of diverse parts is beautiful. A monochromatic sunset would hardly inspire pause and awe. But because so many different colors and tonalities are brought together in perfect unity around an intensely fiery sun, most of us reach for a camera when we see it. Similarly, unity in the Body of Christ is not a boring sameness, but rather, it is the thoughtful joining together of many different parts to form a pleasing and complex whole. God distributes His gifts to us in such a way that this is accomplished. Our gifts, when we join together and use them with Christ at the center, create a beautiful picture of service within His Kingdom—so much so that people here take note and may even stand in awe as they recognize the Son.

Now that we see the necessity and beauty of diversity, let's spend a little time on those things that Paul mentions are—and should be regarded as—the same.

We are members of the same body that functions for the same purpose. Just as the Trinity is made of three distinct Persons who have different roles and functions but who are unified as the One and Only God, so are we separate members of the *same Body*, which is Christ. Although we have different roles, different gifts, and come from different walks of life, we are—not “*should be*,” but *are*—united in the same Body under the same Lord. As such, we share the same purpose. We're going to dive into this more on Day 4 this week, but for now, let's just identify that God gives gifts to His children so that we may help each other. Oh, praise Him! He knows that this world and our work in it can get exhausting, exasperating, overwhelming, discouraging, and challenging in a variety of ways. He gives us tangible support in each other so that we can press on and run our race well and with purpose.

We serve the same Lord. While our differences are designed to help and complement each other, they are all meant to come together under the headship of the same Lord. As a result, there are some things that need to be brought into conformity with Christ's standards. This is where we need to specially cling to and guard the doctrinal truth that has been entrusted to us. We need to bow before God as the Holy One who sets the standards for His people. Our unity under Christ is important, but we need to make sure we are uniting under the right leadership. Just as unity doesn't mean uniformity, it also should not be confused with blind tolerance.

Let me take a moment here to address something that has become popular theology in our culture—that all people from different religions ultimately worship the same God. I think we all know well enough that that's not true. There is only one God—and He is Jehovah. Jesus, who is God the Son, died to save all people; but only when we acknowledge that He is the *only God* and that He is indeed exactly who He says He is; when we accept that Christ Jesus is full deity and that He also came to earth as a man; when we accept that He died for our sins, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven to sit at the Father's right hand; when we acknowledge that His death is the only sufficient payment for our sins; when we humble ourselves in obedience to His standards; that is when we can say that we are unified under the same God. Any other claim is a lie. Our God gave us His name so that we would know who He is. He is not the same as the god of any other religion. He is the LORD.

When we serve the same God and are members of His Body, we can be sure that our differences are meant to enliven the family and help to accomplish our Father's work. The purpose of these different gifts is the same. So let's thank God for how He has divided our work but united our purpose. Let's come together in appreciation *of* each other and with a spirit of genuine care *for* each other. If our service within the church truly becomes an expression of God's love for our brothers and sisters; if our focus is firmly set on helping each other with the work God assigned; then self-promotion and jealousy will give way to powerful but humble service as the unified Body of Christ Jesus.

Consider: Take a moment to reflect on the gifts God has given you *and* some other brothers and

sisters in your life. How can you use your different gifts and callings to serve Christ together?

Pray: Thank God for His creativity. Thank Him that He is the model for unity in diversity. Ask Him to grow your desire and provide opportunities for you join your brothers and sisters in Christ, to care for them, and to work together in Christ's Kingdom.

Day 3

Interdependence in the Body of Christ

"The eye can never say to the hand, 'I don't need you.' The head can't say to the feet, 'I don't need you.'"
1 Corinthians 12:21 NLT

We understand that God's Spirit alone is the One who gives us our gifts and that these gifts—though different in many ways—are given from the same God and for the same overall purpose. Today, we're going to study what I consider to be an absolutely beautiful characteristic that God built into our giftings in order to safeguard and build our unity in the Body of Christ. This lesson is a little shorter, but it's equally important to our understanding of the spiritual gifts.

Please read 1 Corinthians 12:21-26; then review 1 Corinthians 12:7-11.

- In your own words, write what you think Paul is getting at when he talks about weaker or less honorable body parts receiving special care in 1 Corinthians 12:22-24.
- What is the goal in taking special care of such parts (vv. 25-26)?

As was mentioned in the introduction to this week's study, some in the Corinthian church likely had a higher regard for those believers whose spiritual gifts were more obvious and likely of an oratory nature—namely, speaking in tongues. Such a gift would be prized in the city of Corinth because the culture was one that had a love for wisdom and its display through rhetoric. Thus, one who spoke through the power of the Holy Spirit in unknown or heavenly languages likely received special honor within the Corinthian church.

However, in this section of chapter 12, Paul explains that the Holy Spirit lovingly distributes gifts to the Body of Christ in such a way that honors and specially cares for those who perhaps aren't given particularly "showy" gifts but instead have received gifts that operate more modestly. To those, Paul says, God gives special honor and care just as we give special clothing and care to our more modest body parts.

Are these parts less important? To the contrary; they are essential and special! But their function is more private to the rest of the body. So it is with some of Jesus' body as it works within the church.

- According to verse 10:

⇒ One person may be given the ability to prophesy. What related gift might another person be given?

⇒ The Spirit may empower one person to speak in unknown languages, but someone else "may be given the ability to _____ what is being said."

Those gifts that were less obvious and therefore perhaps considered less important within the Corinthian church, Paul says, were absolutely essential. Without important counterparts like discernment and interpretation of tongues, prophecy and speaking in tongues could either be abused or consistently held under scrutiny, thereby destroying any effectiveness and benefit of the gift to the rest of the Body of Christ. What a tragedy that would be! So God gives a special honor to and dependency upon the less obviously-displayed gifts like the ones mentioned above.

To be dependent upon someone is to rely on him or her for support. *Interdependence* is defined simply as "the state of being dependent upon one another: mutual dependence." This is the relationship God designed for Christ's church and the one that He upholds in the way His Spirit distributes gifts to us. We are meant to rely on each other for support. No one is greater; we all need each other. Not one gift is meant to function exclusively or to be elevated above another, but each one compliments and enhances the others. The result is an atmosphere of humility and service to each other. Grounds for boasting are eliminated, and there are safeguards against unjust abuse or scrutiny of certain gifts. In other words, "the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love" (Eph. 4:16).

Consider: What gifts do you typically regard as "more important" than others? Why? Which have you thought hold lesser value? Why?

Pray: Thank God that *He* values every gift He gives and that He values *you*. Ask Him to increase your esteem for every one of His gifts and the people to whom He gives them.

Day 4

For Each Other

“Here are some of the parts God has appointed for the church: first are apostles, second are prophets, third are teachers, then those who do miracles, those who have the gift of healing, those who can help others, those who have the gift of leadership, those who speak in unknown languages.”

1 Corinthians 12:28

Oh, my friends, today is an exciting lesson! Actually, I've found each one exciting this week, and I hope you have, too. I can't sufficiently express how much I love that God reveals Himself every single time we seek Him. We've touched on today's topic throughout this week. There's no way we couldn't have because Paul wove it into the entirety of 1 Corinthians 12 and also into what we read in Ephesians 4 Romans 12 this week.

Please read 1 Corinthians 12:27-30.

- Why do you think Paul gives a ranking order of importance to the gifts of the Spirit?
- Why would apostles, prophets, and teachers be listed as the three highest gifts?

As we studied yesterday, many in the Corinthian church may have been giving special importance to those who were empowered by the Holy Spirit with the gift of tongues. This ranking of gifts, then, can be viewed as a final and decisive correction on the issue of elevating certain gifts over others. There is more for us to glean from this passage of 1 Corinthians 12, though.

Please read Acts 2:1-4, 33-41 and Ephesians 4:8-16.

- According to Acts 2:33 and Ephesians 4:8, what did Christ do when “He ascended to the heights?”
- What are some of the gifts that He gave to the church, according to Ephesians 4:11?

The Holy Spirit's highest gifts affect the entire church. This is what struck me most in all of our reading today. The reason that Paul gives a definitive ranking to our spiritual gifts is because he wants to draw attention to the ones that most profoundly influence the entire church.

- * In 1 Corinthians 12:7, he says that all gifts are given “so we can help each other.”
- * In verse 21, he says that we all need each other.
- * In verse 25, Paul says that we are all given different gifts so that we can care for each other.
- * And in Ephesians 4:16, Paul says that every part of the Body is given its own special work in order to help the rest of the body function and grow.

Now look at Ephesians 4:11. The specific gifts that Paul mentions as being gifted “to” the church are the same ones (with the addition of evangelists) that he lists as the top three in 1 Corinthians 12:28. Apostles, prophets, and teachers have the most profound impact on the entire church because the responsibility of their calling is to encourage and equip the rest of the church body to do their jobs. They are the ones who are charged with building up everyone else to effective ministry, and therefore, their gifts are not just gifts for the individual but for the entire church.

That being said, *all* gifts are for the benefit of the church, and since all are given from the same Spirit, each is to be regarded as valuable. Every gift is intended to build up the body and enable it to function at optimal health. Why? Quite simply, we need a healthy church body in order to go out into the world and reach the lost.

We need teachers to teach sound doctrine; we need those with discernment to help check our teachers and those with the gift of prophecy; we need those with wisdom and those with knowledge to help us navigate the difficult areas of life in godly ways; we need those with hospitality to refresh others' spirits and to help foster relationships; we need those who can lead to help bring order and efficiency to the church and its endeavors; we need those who are generous to give accordingly in order to make the church's work possible; we need those who serve to do so gladly because truly, nothing would otherwise be accomplished!

I am amazed at the beauty of each of the gifts God gives His people. And I am amazed at His generosity in their common purpose—to build up others who follow Christ so that we are *all* well cared for and healthy, and can, in turn, serve and care for the world Christ died to save.

When Christ ascended to heaven, He gave the Holy Spirit to believers so that “the entire universe would be filled with Himself.” Wow. Now that's a pretty big “so that.” How would Christ sending the Holy Spirit enable the whole universe to be filled with Jesus? First, the Spirit of God is the One who “hovered” and moved at creation. He is the One who actively created the universe according to the will of God and the Word of His mouth. Therefore, for Christ's Spirit to fill the universe is no difficult task; He created it.

I think, though, that another part of this can be understood according to the Spirit's indwelling of believers and the gifts He brings at salvation. As we learned on Day 1 this week, the Spirit brings gifts to every believer according to the grace of Christ and according to the calling that Christ gives to each one of us. Each

of us is called to different tasks, but the spread of the Gospel is at the root of each one.

Without God's Spirit empowering this mission and equipping us for these tasks, not one of us could fulfill our purpose. How else would Peter's sermon at Pentecost have so deeply affected the hearts of his hearers that 3,000 would be saved in one day? The Spirit was there to convict, but He also gifted Peter with apostleship and teaching so that the Word of God would be effectively and powerfully proclaimed.

Consider that Christ so cares for His church that He specially designated roles to us and gave His Spirit to lavish gifts upon us for the express purpose of building us up and keeping us healthy and vibrant. How are you using your gifts for the health of Christ's church?

Pray: Thank God for His generosity and care for you. He cares about your physical health, your mental health, and your spiritual health. He cares about your whole person and His Son's entire church Body. He has given gifts in advance for your health and building up. Ask Him how you might use what you have for others in His Body.

Day 5

Earnestly Desire...and Use

"So you should earnestly desire the most helpful gifts."

1 Corinthians 12:31a

As we close this week, we're going to take all that we've studied and put it into good practice. This may be the part that some of you were hoping and waiting for. We know that God gives us gifts; we know He values each one; we know He wants us to use them for His glory and for His church's health. So then, how do we figure out which one or ones we have, and how do we even begin to use it (them)? If we're supposed to value every spiritual gift, why would Paul tell the Corinthian church to desire the higher ones? Let's find some answers together.

Please read Romans 12:1-3 and Philippians 2:3-13.

- What is one way we discern God's will in our lives (Rom. 12:2)?

- What did Christ do, even to the point of death?

Humbly obeyed

exalted Himself

Prayed

- From whom comes the desire and the ability to work according to God's plan and pleasure?

Many of you already know what gifts God has given you, and you're using them beautifully to serve God's people. I am amazed at the generosity of time and gifts in our own church. Thank you. For those of you who might still be wondering *if* the Holy Spirit gave you any gifts, let me assure you that He has! As we saw in Acts yesterday, the Spirit doesn't come without power; and when Jesus ascended to Heaven, He sent His Spirit with gifts for His people; when we accept Christ as our Salvation, we receive His Spirit and those specially selected gifts that the Spirit chooses for each one of us. So yes, you *do* have a gift that has been divinely chosen just for you. Celebrate that! But maybe you've been following Christ for many years, and you still don't know what your gift and your calling in Him are. Well my friends, here's where the responsibility shifts to each one of us individually.

In Romans 12:2, we are told to resist sinful practices and instead let God renew and change our minds. Through this change, we know that we have "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16), and we can then honestly and accurately assess ourselves to discover what God's will is for us. The original Greek for the phrase "learn to know God's will" comes from the word *dokimazō*, meaning "to test, by implication to approve." Hold that thought.

As we continue into Romans 12:3-8, Paul tells his readers to honestly evaluate themselves, being careful not to think too highly of themselves but rather "measuring [them]selves by the faith God has given [them]." In other words, God has apportioned certain gifts to each one of us, and He has given us each differing levels of faith and gifts by that grace, as we learned at the beginning of this week. We should each spend some time in honest self-reflection concerning what has God given us. This is where we pull together Philippians 2:12-13 and Romans 12:2-3.

- * **Pray.** Have you sought the Lord on this yet? Have you asked the Giver what He's given you? God doesn't want His gifts to you to remain a mystery. He wants you to know what you have from Him, to be thankful, and to *use them!* We'll study a little more on this in just a few minutes. But the right first step is to pray and ask what gifts God has given you.
- * **Consider that even the desire and ability to serve God come from God.** What are your desires? What are your talents? Where do you *want* to serve the Lord?
- * **Assess.** Take a look at the list of spiritual gifts from Day 2. With what do you *think* God gifted you? Be honest with yourself. You may want the gift of hospitality, but God may have given you generosity instead.

* **Be humble, and be willing to serve.** We read in Philippians 2:6-8 that “though [Christ] was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to...he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on the cross.” As we seek to discover where we fit into this body of believers, we must also be humble and willing to serve God obediently. It’s hard to do jobs that are unnoticed, but whose attention are we seeking? Are we trying to please God or people? Are we seeking praise for ourselves, or do we really want to build up the Body of Christ because we absolutely *adore* Christ? This leads us to the final step (and one extra).

Test it! We discussed the testing nature of the word *dokimazō* a little earlier. Its use in the phrase “learn to know God’s will” implies that

* we’ll have to do a little work to really understand what God’s will is for us, and we can rightly apply this to discovering our spiritual gifts, too. After an honest self-assessment and a good amount of prayer, try out what you think God has gifted to you. Start small, and be intentional. Not every area of service to Christ’s church takes place within the four walls of the church. Some of the most effective ministry to the Body of Christ is done quietly and on a personal level. Do you think you have the gift of encouragement? Ask God to put someone on your heart who He wants you to encourage, and then write a note or send a text. See what God does with that.

* **Keep praying.** I know I’ve said it several times already, but I cannot overemphasize the importance of prayer as you seek to understand God’s will in using the gifts He has given you. So often we work and serve in areas that are not assigned to us by God. The result is ineffectiveness at best—and frustration, burnout, or resentment at worst. Christ divides the labor in His kingdom and within His own Body as He sees fit. He is the Head—which means that He has the brain and delegates the responsibilities. When we plunge into work that we think we ought to without consulting Him, we assume a responsibility that is not ours. Seek Him. He wants you to fulfill your purpose; He’s the One who created it for you.

Now that we’ve talked about humbly serving where Christ assigns us and according to the gifts that His Spirit gives to us, we need to understand how 1 Corinthians 12:31 fits. Paul tells the Corinthian church that they “should earnestly desire the most helpful gifts.” First, let’s note that this was, again, likely in response to the fact that the Corinthian church seemed to be giving special attention to those with very obvious manifestations of the Spirit’s gifts. So Paul is first and foremost steering this church toward an understanding of what God considers to be the highest gifts: those that offer the most help to others. He’ll expand upon this in chapter 14, which we’ll study in a couple weeks.

But didn’t Paul spend the earlier part of the chapter teaching the Corinthian church to appreciate each gift and consider it valuable to the Body? He did! But let’s read what Christ Himself said about using what we have for God’s Kingdom.

Please read Matthew 25:14-30.

- Fill in the blanks for verse 29:

“To those who _____ what they are given, even _____ will be given, and they will have an _____. But from those who _____, even what little they have _____ will be taken away.”

To desire the gifts that are greater—that help God’s people most—is to share in God’s purpose and to share His heart. In that case, our desire is directed toward what He wants instead of being focused on our own glory. Such a desire is always pleasing to Him.

Furthermore, according to the Parable of the Talents, when we use what the Holy Spirit gives us and invest it back into the Kingdom of God, we’ll find that God gives us more opportunities, more responsibilities, and sometimes even more gifts. If we *want* to serve God and are focused on His glory, His plan, His people; if we wisely manage the gifts He’s given us and desire even more because we want to joyfully serve His Body, do you think He’ll say no? But first we must put the ones we know we have to good use! Start small, but *invest* what you have been given into building up God’s Kingdom. He never misses an action or an intention. If you use what you have—even in a small way—with a thankful heart and a focus on His glory, He will notice and will entrust you with more.

Consider: Have you spent time discovering what the Holy Spirit has gifted to you? How can your gifting help build up the Body of Christ? What opportunities might fit with what you think the Lord has given you? If you’ve been serving and using the Spirit’s gifts for a long time, take a moment to reflect on how God has grown what He’s given you. Where did you start? How has God entrusted you with more responsibility?

Pray: Begin to seek the Lord if you’re just discovering what He’s given you. Ask Him where He wants you to serve Him, and ask Him to create in you the desire to will and to act according to His good purposes. If you’re already serving, thank God for the gift of that responsibility. He can accomplish anything He wants to with His Word, but He chooses to entrust us with responsibilities and privileges because He honors and esteems His people (Psalm 8:4-8). Thank Him—and ask Him to continue to pour out His favor on you with even more opportunities to serve your King.

By Jennifer Skinner