

Exercise Spiritual Gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1-31)

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I love the camaraderie of watching a football game with diehard fans. All eyes are glued to the screen. Everyone wants to hear what the announcers are saying. No one's reading a book or having side conversations.

We jump up and exchange high-fives every time we score. We holler at the referees every time they penalize our team. We grieve when one of our guys is injured. We cheer when the other team fails to convert on third down. I think I had an elevated heart rate for three hours straight when my Eagles trounced the Pats to win it all at the end of the 2017 season. It was thrilling. It was exhausting. We finally did it.

Except, "we" didn't do anything. The 53-members of the team blocked, sprinted, and tackled for sixty minutes. I ate chips and watched them amidst all the comforts of a climate-controlled living room. Fifty-three people were very active. The 100 million who saw the game on TV didn't do jack squat. From the comfort of our living room we attend the Super Bowl, but we don't participate in the Super Bowl.

As followers of Christ, we enjoy being part of a vibrant and growing congregation just like I enjoy being an Eagles fan. We even talk about how "our" church is doing. But all of that emotional identification can mask the reality that we're doing nothing more than attending a meeting where we watch other Christians preach, sing, pray, fellowship, and give. When I chat with other pastors, it's not uncommon for me to hear stories of how a small handful of faithful members are doing the lion's share of the work of ministry.

Friends, I'm deeply grateful, by and large, that has not been my experience at KingsWay. This congregation is filled with men and women who have faithfully and sacrificially laid down their life for decades to do the work of ministry. But as I recently shared with our staff team, I have a concern as many of those long standing members grow older. I have a concern as the Lord brings us out of a decade of crisis and into a new season of prosperity where there's less of a felt need to have all hands on deck.

I share it with you not as a rebuke but as a warning, though if the Spirit sees fit to convict you of spiritual laziness or apathy through the preaching of his Word, praise God! He disciplines those he loves. I share it because I see the selfishness that lingers in my own heart and I'm concerned we could become spiritually passive



when it comes to building up our church. We could content ourselves with all the good feelings that come with being “part” of a happening congregation where God is on the move, when in reality, we’re “part” of nothing more than a growing group of attendees.

That is not what God intends the local church to be. Ephesians 4:15-16, “...We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” A passive church member is an oxymoron. There is no category in Scripture for a Christian who merely attends a Sunday service and never does anything to personally build up the church.

Sports games are fun, but passive. Not so the church of Jesus Christ. It’s not a meeting we attend. It’s a gathering in which we participate. We participate when the Word is preached through active listening. We participate when someone stands up to pray by agreeing with and affirming their praise, confession, or intercession as our own. We participate by bringing the material wealth God has entrusted to us and giving generously to support the ministry of the gospel.

However, there’s a final category of participation, a category that matters both in our Sunday gatherings and throughout the entire rest of the week. It’s called the exercise of spiritual gifts. That’s what 1 Corinthians 12 is all about. The Apostle Paul’s just spent eleven chapters addressing all manner of different issues in the church. He spends the next three chapters, however, on a single issue – spiritual gifts.

There’s a significant element of correction in play here for the Corinthians, but it’s a correction compelled by a biblical vision for the church that is no less relevant for us.

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Jesus loves his church. He laid his own life down to create and build up a people for himself. Without question, he’s more committed to the spiritual health and growth of our body than anyone else in this room. So what has he done? He’s given every believer abilities and expressions of his power, some more permanent and some occasional, some more natural and some more remarkable, to strengthen and

build up the church for the glory of his name. And they're called "spiritual gifts" because they are (verse 7) a "manifestation of the Spirit."

Depending on your background, you may be thrilled, terrified, or indifferent to this topic. Regardless, if the all-wise God has seen fit to give his children spiritual gifts we should work hard to understand and embrace them. He doesn't make mistakes. He always knows what he's doing. So we can dive in with faith and joy, confident that Jesus has something incredibly good in store for us and his people. Allow me to highlight a few of Paul's main points here, focusing primarily on the first 11 verses.

1) THE GIFTS OF GOD THE SPIRIT ARE GIVEN TO MAKE MUCH OF GOD THE SON

Two questions predominate in conversation about spiritual gifts. What exactly are they? And how do you know which ones you have? As much as we might prefer, Paul doesn't start there. He begins with the reason God gives them in the first place. He reminds the Corinthians of their spiritual experience before they came to faith in Christ.

They were (verse 2) "led stray to mute idols." The spiritual forces at work in their life did not lead to honoring or exalting the one true God. The Evil One, Satan, and every power aligned with him led them, in a host of different ways, to honor and exalt all manner of false gods. Daniel 5:23, "And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored."

All of that gloriously changed when they turned from sin to trust and obey Jesus. The Spirit of God that raised Christ from the dead made his home within them, bringing an entirely new spiritual influence to bear in their life. And the Holy Spirit's calling card, the litmus test for his activity in their life, is clear. If you want to know whether a word or deed is a result of the activity of the Holy Spirit as opposed to an evil spirit, ask this question, "Does the 'inspired' word or deed make much of Jesus or not?"

Verse 3, "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." In other words, wherever the Spirit of God is genuinely at work, Jesus will be exalted. Jesus will be honored. The activity of God the Spirit always glorifies the name of God the Son. Jesus promised as much in John 15:26, "But when the Helper

comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.”

So before we wade into this whole conversation about spiritual gifts, Corinthians, let’s make something clear up front. The only actions that are inspired by the Holy Spirit are words and deeds that make much of Jesus. If they draw attention to you, or to the gift more than the Giver, something’s wrong. Hear that, friends. Anything we speak or do in the name of exercising a spiritual gift must make much of Jesus and cause those around us to do the same.

If it doesn’t, we’re either not exercising a spiritual gift at all or we’re twisting it for our own purposes. It doesn’t matter how “inspired” or “Spirit led” someone claims to be. The gifts of God the Spirit are given to make much of God the Son – no exceptions.

2) THE DIVERSITY OF GIFTS REFLECTS GOD’S DESIGN AND DISPLAYS HIS POWER

In verse 4, Paul begins to help us understand exactly what these “spiritual gifts” that make much of Jesus actually look like in the life of the church. He makes two important points prior to giving a list of examples in verse 8. First, there is a tremendous variety of gifts. Verse 4, “Now there are varieties of gifts...varieties of service...varieties of activities.”

Sometimes people think, “That person is really into spiritual gifts,” by which they mean someone is really into more remarkable or obviously supernatural manifestations of the Spirit like prophecy, words of knowledge, or speaking in tongues. That’s not a biblical perspective. The fact that the lists of gifts in verses 8-10 is different from the list of gifts in verse 28-30, which are different from the list of gifts in Romans 12 isn’t Paul contradicting himself. These are spiritual gifts. No wait. These are spiritual gifts. Actually, these are the spiritual gifts.

No! The fact that no two lists are identical tells us what? They’re not comprehensive or exhaustive. They’re illustrative and representative. Paul’s giving us examples, combining what some might label as rather ordinary – gifts of faith, helping, or administering – with what seems more supernatural – gifts of prophecy, healing, or interpretation of tongues. With the exception of the office of apostle, men who witnessed the risen Christ and were authorized by him to write Scripture, all of the spiritual gifts operative in the early church remain available for us to use until the Lord returns.

For the sake of time, I won't linger to define or elaborate on all of the gifts in these lists. I simply want you to notice there are a multitude, a multitude of abilities the Spirit of God gives the people of God to honor and exalt the Son of God. To treat the examples of spiritual gifts in the New Testament as a fixed number and then devise all sorts of spiritual gift tests to figure out which one God gave you reflects our obsession with personality tests more than the logic of Scripture.

Second, there is a unity in the diversity of gifts that reflects the very character of God and displays his power. Look back at verse 4. "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."

Those three words – Spirit, Lord, God – refer to what? The three persons of the Trinity. He is one God in three persons - Father, Son, and Spirit. The Godhead itself represents unity in diversity and spiritual gifts are no different. They all find their source in the One True God, yet the gifts are not all identical.

What does that reality guard us against, friends? Our incessant tendency to label some of the gifts as "more spiritual" than others. Is the ability to prophecy "more spiritual" than the ability to help? Is the ability to speak in tongues "more spiritual" than the ability to do acts of mercy? No. They are not identical, but they are equally spiritual in the sense that they are all empowered by God.

My heart sinks when I hear Christians talk as if anyone can clean baby toys in the nursery or make coffee in the foyer, but, you know, it takes a special gift to preach God's Word, lead worship, share a prophecy, or do something else that's "really" spiritual. That's utter nonsense, friends. To think like that is to deny the supernatural power of God at work in what appears ever so mundane and ordinary. He esteems what we disdain. He takes what is weak in the eyes of the world and uses it to shame the wise. He's a God who sits high and looks low.

Am I saying everything we do as Christians is a spiritual gift because we can't do anything apart from God? No. We certainly can't do anything apart from God. At the same time, Paul makes clear with phrases like "to one" and "to another" that there is something unique about a spiritual gift that goes beyond the power the Spirit gives every Christian to love God and love our neighbor. Spiritual gifts usually manifest themselves in the form of a pronounced strength in a particular area of service or ministry. One Christian may be strong in one area, another Christian will be strong in another, and that is by God's design.

There's also a significant word of comfort here, brothers and sisters. When God gives a spiritual gift, he doesn't just impart a capacity for service or ministry. He imparts power to do the work, power to exercise the gift. He doesn't give them and then cut us loose to make the most of what we've received. He gives them and animates them. He gives them and empowers them. Verse 11, "All of these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apports to each one individually as he wills."

We need to guard against the not-so-subtle pride that would say, "Because I have this gift, I must be more important in God's kingdom." Or, "Because I don't have that gift and they do, they must be more important than me in God's kingdom." Don't begrudge the sovereign will of God or arrogantly interpret it as an expression of his displeasure.

If he has not given or has yet to give a gift you desire, don't question his love. He's proven his love for you once and for all at the cross. Trust his wisdom. The Evil One would distract you from stewarding the gifts the Father has given by fixing your gaze and those he has seen fit to withhold. Allow him nothing of the sort. The diversity of the gifts reflects God's design and displays his power.

3) THE PURPOSE OF THE GIFTS IS TO BUILD UP THE CHURCH

Look at verse 7. This is Paul's thesis statement for the entire passage. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Take note of the first four words – "To each is given." What does that mean? It means the same thing it does in verse 11 where Paul says the Spirit apports "to each one individually." Spiritual gifts are not a blessing God gives some Christians. They are a blessing he gives every Christian.

Does every Christian have the same spiritual gift? No. Remember point 2. But does every Christian receive "the manifestation of the Spirit" in some way? Yes. Don't you love that phrase – the "manifestation" of the Spirit? Spiritual gifts are not about you and me trumpeting the cool powers we have. They are about the Spirit displaying his divine power in and through our lives. From start to finish, they're not about us. They're given by God, manifest his power, and redound to his glory.

So what's the point of giving each Christian spiritual gifts? Why not reserve spiritual gifts for a select handful of really mature believers who can do some serious spiritual damage for God's kingdom? The answer is simple, really. God wants every



member of the body to be involved in building up the body. King Jesus loves his body. He loves us, KingsWay. And he has ordained for our local church to be built up, strengthened, and brought to maturity in Christ as every member exercises every gift in a way that advances our common good.

It is very easy for our pursuit and exercise of spiritual gifts to functionally advance something altogether different. After the service today we're hosting a ministry team fair in the foyer. All twelve of our Sunday volunteer teams that make our weekly gathering possible will be represented at tables throughout the room. It's an opportunity for you to learn what they do, thank them for their service, and find out how you could get involved. Consider this scenario:

Say our newest team leader – Doug Roberts – says to you, “Hey, we really need some help greeting people at the doors before the service starts. It's called the “Host Team” because we do more than just shake hands. We try to lead the charge in practicing hospitality, welcoming one another as God in Christ has welcomed us, just like a good host. Or maybe Sara Campbell says we need a volunteer in the nursery. Or Christopher Deloglos says we need someone to coil cables after the service.

What's the first thing that pops into your mind? Would it be fun for me to greet people, hold babies, or coil cables? Do I feel like doing that or not? If the answer is “no,” but we don't want to say as much because it could sound selfish or lazy, what might we say instead? “You're kind to ask, but I'm not sure that's not really my thing. I have other spiritual gifts.” Like what? “Well, I'm more of an introvert, so hospitality is out. I enjoy teaching the Word more than holding screaming infants. And honestly, I've seen God use me more in singing or leading worship, and I can't really do that and coil cables. We all have different gifts, right?”

What's wrong in that scenario? Could you be a natural introvert? Sure. Could you have a spiritual gift of teaching or leadership? Absolutely. Might the Lord have used you in those ways for many years? Sure. I don't doubt that for a minute. But something's missing. Something really important is missing. And the fact it's missing suggests your exercise of spiritual gifts is more about making much of you than Jesus. You're not giving any consideration to the common good of the body.

Is there wisdom in channeling our limited time and resources into areas of proven spiritual gifting? Absolutely. I spend a lot of time as a pastor trying to identify, equip, and deploy volunteers accordingly. But even as we ask, “Lord, what gifts have you

given me?" we must ask another question that is no less important – "Lord, what does this church need the most right now? What could I do to advance the "common good"?"

Friend, that might mean serving in an area where you know you have a proven spiritual gift. It might even be on stage and come with countless opportunities for the whole congregation to observe and affirm your gift. But it might not. It might mean, and in fact you should assume it will mean, giving more weight to what your fellow members say the church really needs than to what you most feel like doing.

Luke 22:26–27, "Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves."

So much writing, and thinking, and preaching about spiritual gifts is focused on who? Me. "What gifts has God given me? I'm looking for a church that will affirm my ministry. I know what spiritual gifts God has given me. If you're humble, you'll agree and let me serve accordingly." Wait. If who's humble? Maybe we should take a look in the mirror.

If we humbly give more weight to "the common good," more attention to what other people say the church needs, and choose to lay down our lives accordingly, might we discover a new spiritual gift of "helping" or "mercy"? Might we show up on Sunday morning "earnestly desiring" to prophesy? Might we be willing to step out in faith and pray for God to physically heal someone?

Might we discover that the spiritual gifts are not about activities that reinforce our sense of personal competency but rather our awareness of our own weakness and our absolute dependence on the power of God? Might we discover a new joy in exercising our spiritual gifts for the common good instead of our own comfort, reputation, or personal fulfillment? Verse 12 and all the illustrations Paul uses in verses 14-24 respond with a resounding "Yes!"

We honor Jesus with our spiritual gifts by diligently exercising them in a way that builds up the church – even when it's hard. The goal, as Paul reminds the Corinthians in verses 25-26, is to care for the body because spiritual gifts are not about making us look great or feel important. They're about honoring Jesus and building up his body.

Exercise them accordingly and you will inevitably experience more joy, not less, more satisfaction, not less, more of God's power, not less, and more of his Spirit working in you, not less. The great key to discovering and exercising the spiritual gifts God has given you is not looking inward and evaluating yourself. It's looking outward and seeking the common good.

CONCLUSION

God graciously empowers every believer to glorify Christ and edify his body through the exercise of spiritual gifts. That means every member is essential, every gift is essential, and we should especially desire those gifts that provide spiritual help and encouragement to the Christians around us.

That's why the gift of prophecy, for example, is greater than tongues in the list at the end of chapter 12. As Paul says in the next chapter (1 Corinthians 14:5), "The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up." What gifts the Lord sees fit to give you is his decision. Whether you lovingly use those gifts whenever we gather as a church or opt for passive attendance is your decision.

I urge you, brothers and sisters, as God has given you a gift, be faithful to use it, even when it's hard. And take care that you don't assume simply because God hasn't given you a particular gift you will never receive that gift. He calls us to "earnestly desire" them – not so he can let us down in the end, but because he is eager to answer our requests.

We're going to sing to the Lord in just a minute, offering our lives to him. As we do that, let me invite two groups of people to come down for prayer. The first are those of you who desire the Lord to increase the spiritual gifts in your life. Maybe there's even a particular gift you have desired to grow in for a long time.

The second group are those who realize they've grown apathetic or passive in using the spiritual gifts God has given you to build up our church. The temptation to coast or take it easy is close at hand. You need a fresh impartation of power from God to resist laziness and lay down your life to build up the church.

If you're in one of those categories or have another specific need, please come down as we sing. It would be a privilege to pray with you.

