

Spiritual gifts and spiritual fellowship

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[0:00] Well, perhaps you can turn with me in your Bibles, if you have one, to 1 Corinthians and chapter 12.

! You'll find it on page 1153 if you're using a church Bible. We'll read the first 11 verses. We're continuing to think together about the kind of house that Jesus builds, the image of the church as a house in which God comes to dwell.

And what does it look like when the life of God is in the life of the church? It takes us to our topic this evening, fellowship and spiritual gifts.

So let me read from 1 Corinthians 12 and at verse 1. Now about the gift of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.

You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to dumb idols. Therefore, I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, Jesus be cursed.

[1:13] And no one can say, Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit. There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.

There are different kinds of workings, but in all of them and in everyone, it is the same God at work. Now to each one, the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

To one that is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom. To another, a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit. To another, faith by the same Spirit. To another, gifts of healing by that one Spirit.

To another, miraculous powers. To another, prophecy. To another, distinguishing between spirits. To another, speaking in different kinds of tongues. And to still another, the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit. And he distributes them to each one just as he determines.

[2:14] And we'll leave our reading there. Let's begin here with an idea that seems to be popular. Maybe you've had these kind of conversations with people who would describe themselves as spiritual, but not religious.

I think we're so familiar with it now, we probably understand some of the things going on there. A dislike or a suspicion of organized religion, perhaps. And so people would prefer to meet God by themselves, maybe in nature.

Maybe to have an individualized religion. There is, for some, an emphasis on the priority of feelings. That's much more real than fixed truths and traditions, according to some ways of thinking.

Often, the spiritual but not religious movement, it can be linked with mystical practices. Doing different activities in order to connect with the divine.

That seems to have more potency in people's minds than coming to church to worship, for example. And so the question that we are invited to consider as we come into our Bible text is, what does it mean to be spiritual?

[3:29] What does God say being spiritual looks like? What does it look like to enjoy a real relationship with God in our life and in our church?

Is spirituality like Burger King, where each of us can have it our own way? Or is spirituality defined, ultimately defined by God?

Is being spiritual a solo pursuit? So we can take ourselves up a mountain or we can go on a retreat? Or is it principally something practiced in community and among God's people?

We want to be, here in this church, a spiritual fellowship. And we want to be a people who exercise spiritual gifts.

But what do we mean by that? And maybe we'll think about what don't we mean by that. And most importantly, what does the Bible teach us about this issue? So we're going to ask ourselves some fundamental questions from these 11 verses.

[4:39] First of all, we're going to ask, well, what does it mean to be a spiritual person? Because that's addressed in the first three verses. And then we're going to ask ourselves, where do spiritual gifts come from?

And we'll see those are addressed in verses four to six. And then we'll think about what is the purpose of spiritual gifts? What do they have to do with life together in a local church?

And we find that addressed in verses seven to 11. So we're just going to simply walk our way through the text. So here's the first question. What does it mean to be a spiritual person?

Just to give you a bit of background. So Paul, an apostle, writing this letter, he's writing a letter to a church in Corinth in the first century AD.

And it's a big question within Corinth because some of the people within the church, they're puffed up with pride. They're going around saying things like, we think that we are super apostles.

[5:38] And we think we're super spiritual. There are those who are placing their gifts and their capacities in a higher league than others. And they are looking down in pride on others.

And they brought over some of their worldly ways of thinking into the church. And so there's lots of confusion, lots of division, lots of pride. And you can see it all through the letter. If you look with me at verse one, you hear Paul say this.

Now about the gifts of the spirits, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. When you read this in 1 Corinthians, it means Paul is responding to a question that he's been asked.

And it seems like we don't get the exact question. But it seems to be, you know, if I have this gift and they have that gift, does that mean I'm first class and they're second class?

Paul, can we call ourselves super spiritual because we are engaging in certain practices and we have certain gifts? And so Paul writes about spiritual gifts.

[6:44] And at the same time, he writes about how they are to be used in the life of a church. And he does it for three whole chapters, which tells us it's a big deal in Corinth. And it's a big deal to Paul.

And right in the middle, so we're right at the beginning, chapter 12. Right in the middle is chapter 13, which is a really famous chapter of the Bible all about love. Whenever we're thinking about using spiritual gifts, that must be motivated by love.

But anyway, as he begins, who are spiritual according to God? Look at verse 2. He says this to them and about them. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other, you were influenced and led astray to dumb idols.

Now, what he's doing there is not insulting them. He's not trash-talking them in any way. He's saying to them, when you were pagans, before you met Jesus, you thought you were spiritual people.

But in actual fact, what was happening was they were worshiping a false god. Serving a silent, helpless god. And this gives us a clue that just to say, I am a spiritual person, that's not enough if we don't know and love and serve the living God.

[8:01] Look then at verse 3. The first bit of verse 3. He says, therefore, I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, Jesus be cursed.

Okay, so the point here is that certain spiritual ideas that we might have, they simply don't come from God. So, when Paul is writing, there were some Jews who didn't believe in Jesus and they were persecuting and making life difficult for the church.

And they were saying things like, well, we know Jesus must be a false Messiah because he died on the cross and anyone who dies on a cross stands under God's curse.

Therefore, Jesus is cursed. He is anathema. And so, Paul looks at that and says, no, that's wrong. That to be spiritual then, we need to have certain guidelines.

And Paul is saying to us, to be spiritual according to God, we need to be guided by the gospel. We need to understand the language and the logic of the good news.

[9:10] Maybe to help us, just think about in school. Think about language learning in school. Some of us were very proficient at it. Some of us, myself included, not so much.

But if you can try and remember hearing lesson after lesson and you struggle to figure out how you construct a sentence or how you're supposed to understand tenses and what's a verb and all these

persons.

In the same way, it is entirely possible to hear and to see the message of the gospel and for it to just not make sense.

It doesn't compute with our language and our logic. There's a wonderful example of this in John chapter 3. Jesus meets one of the main religious teachers in his day, a man called Nicodemus. And Jesus taught Nicodemus, Nicodemus, to know life with God, you must be born again. And he said to him, you need new birth by the work of the Holy Spirit.

[10:18] And Nicodemus, he hears it, but he's absolutely confused. And Jesus says, look, you're one of Israel's teachers. You should be able to get this. But he couldn't. So it's possible to know the facts, but they don't compute.

We can do the same when it comes to Jesus on the cross. So in a sense, the opponents of Paul, they were kind of half right when they said that Jesus died under a curse.

Because yes, Jesus did die on the cross under God's curse. But he didn't do that because he had done anything wrong. Rather, he was going there as a substitute.

He was a sinless substitute. He was going there in love for others. And death, death had no claim on Jesus.

And Jesus died, but then he rose again in glory and victory. That his life is not marked by curse. Rather, it's marked by God's blessing upon him.

[11:22] And now it's through Jesus that all spiritual blessings flow to his people. And so as we follow Paul's logic, we can say that to be spiritual, we need to know the true God.

And we need to know God's truth. And especially God's truth about his son. Because that takes us to the next test of being spiritual.

Look at the end of verse 3. No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. Now that doesn't mean just to simply mouth the words. Because anybody can say Jesus is Lord.

That's not complicated language. But is it, do I believe Jesus is Lord in a way that I live under his good and loving rule? That's what Paul's talking about. And this truth, this new life where we recognize Jesus is Lord, that's a gift from God.

That's not natural to ourselves. That comes from the Holy Spirit. Where we're able to say, now it's Jesus and not me who's in charge. Now we understand that it's Jesus and not my best efforts.

[12:30] That's how I get saved. It's Jesus and not my mystical practices as to how I can enjoy life with God. And so when we put it all together, we can say this.

We need the spirit of God in us if we are to be spiritual people. That according to the Bible, you can go to Ephesians 2. Without the spirit, without the work of the spirit, we are spiritually dead.

And so to be spiritual, we need to know God. We need to know God's truth. And we need to have God's spirit within us. Otherwise, we'll never trust that Jesus is Lord. There's an old Puritan called Richard Sibbes. And he put it this way.

He said, as the spirit comes from God the Father and God the Son, so he carries us back to the Father and the Son. As the spirit comes from heaven, so he carries us back to heaven.

It's through the spirit that we have this living connection with a living God. So a key activity of the spirit then is to give new life and to give glory to Jesus so that we will proclaim Jesus is Lord.

[13:34] That's what the spirit does. Now, why does this matter? It matters because in this church in Corinth that we're reading about, they were absolutely fascinated by certain gifts.

They were fascinated by tongues and prophecy and signs of power. And they said, listen, that's what makes someone really spiritual. And so what Paul does for us, which is so helpful, is he takes us back to fundamentals.

And so he says, do you know what? The most powerful thing the Holy Spirit would ever do in your life is to bring you to confess that Jesus is Lord. It's that confession and that relationship that defines what it means to be spiritual.

And so he can write to a very divided church and he can say, because this is true, there's no dividing into first and second class Christians because that doesn't exist. Every Christian is a spiritual Christian.

Not dividing and fighting over this is my gift, show me yours. And it's rooted in the gospel and it's rooted in life with God.

[14:39] It's not all about experience and emotion. It's rooted in faith in the Lord Jesus. So that's who the spiritual people are.

Here's our second question from verses four to six. Where do spiritual gifts come from? And to help us with this, picture for a moment, instead of plants and microphones, picture an orchestra on stage.

Maybe think of another stage in your imagination. So they're all dressed up, you know, in black and white, all looking very smart. But over here on one side, you've got the string section. Maybe over here, you've got the brass section.

And way up the back, you've got the percussion. Same orchestra, same outfit, playing the same symphony. But of course, while there is unity, there is also diversity.

Not all playing the same instruments, not all playing the same parts. Now, the picture that Paul gives of the church is that we all have different gifts, but they all come from the same source.

[15 : 42] Look at verse four by way of example. There are different kinds of gifts, but the same spirit distributes them. But the source of our spiritual gifts, again, fundamentally, is not us.

They don't emanate from us. They come from God himself. And what we discover about God himself is he is this wonderful, eternal, three-in-one God. He is the ultimate and perfect example of what it looks like to have diversity within unity.

And even in these verses, Paul is cluing us into this reality. So he talks about God the Spirit. God the Spirit who distributes the different kinds of gifts.

And then he talks about God the Son, the Lord, in verse five. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. And notice that when he talks about Jesus as Lord, he also talks about service. And that reminds us that any gift that we've got is to be used in a Christ-like attitude of service, like Jesus, the servant King.

[16 : 47] And then verse six, he talks about God the Father. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone, it is the same God at work.

God's powerful work in a person's life. That's where spiritual gifts come from. And what we discover from Paul more widely is that the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, they participate together in the whole of the Christian life.

So we looked at it a few weeks ago. In verse 12, we discover that Christ creates this new body, the church, through his death and resurrection. In verse 13 of this chapter, we're told that the Spirit baptizes us into one body.

And then in verse 18, we discover that God the Father, he arranges the parts of the body, the church, just as he pleases. We could take a step further back.

Think about how the Bible presents the work of salvation. And we discover the Father chooses, even before the foundations of the world, and he calls a people to himself.

[17 : 54] But the Son is also involved in salvation because the Son comes and he gives his life to redeem his people from sin. And God, the Spirit is also involved because the Spirit is the one who gives new birth.

The Spirit is the one who vitally unites us to Christ. So the Trinity is involved in every part of the Christian life, not least in the giving of spiritual gifts.

And what we're told here is that these spiritual gifts, they come from God, and they're to be used in fellowship with God. And we're going to discover for the sake of the fellowship of believers.

So if we go back to the orchestra image for a moment, now it is quite likely, if you like classical music, that you have a preference. You like one section more than another. You may be a strings person, or you may be a brass person, you may be a glockenspiel person.

But by the design of the composer, there would be something missing without the other parts of the orchestra. To turn up one at the expense of the other, we would fail to enjoy the beauty of what the composer designed.

[19 : 06] And what the Bible tells us is that God is the master composer of his church. And he designs and he arranges church members with our particular gifts.

And so then the key thing for us is to learn to play our part and to celebrate God's gifts, God's work in others. So there's a heart attitude that's involved as we understand that spiritual gifts come from God.

It begins with humility. If everything that we have comes from God, then we have no room for boasting. And in that humility, we want to exercise our gifts in a way that doesn't take glory to ourself, that gives glory to God.

And it also tells us that the way we use our spiritual gifts, it is an expression of worship. We are participating in spiritual fellowship as we participate in life with God.

And we want to live a life that is worthy of him as we seek to use our gift. Okay. So we've asked a couple of questions. Here's our third and final question then.

[20 : 22] What is the purpose of spiritual gifts? What do spiritual gifts have to do with church fellowship? That's a really important question. I think it's a really fun part of superhero movies.

Maybe especially Spider-Man, Wolverine to a lesser extent. That bit where they discover for the first time that they've got these superpowers. And there's usually sort of a comedy montage of them figuring out in the first place, well, how do I use these new gifts?

And then secondly, how do I use them for good, to be an agent of good? There was a problem, a significant problem in Corinth, in that they were very aware that they had spiritual gifts, but those gifts were being abused.

And it was causing pride and it was causing division because they were claiming they were greater and others were lesser. So how does Paul guide our thinking? Well, look at verse seven.

Here's the big idea. What's the purpose of spiritual gifts? Now to each, the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

[21 : 30] Okay, so whatever our gift is, the Bible is saying we are to use it in God's power to serve God's people and to bring God glory.

And so we should always be reflecting as Christians to ask ourselves, am I in the habit of serving other Christians?

Am I living and acting for God's sake and for theirs? Whatever opportunities we are given. Again, to stay in verse seven for a little bit longer, look at the language that's used.

Now to each one, the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. Spiritual gifts become a manifestation of the Spirit. What's he saying there?

He's saying, in effect, a spiritual gift is how God the Holy Spirit shows up and reveals himself in our lives. It's as we are serving others to God's glory that something of God is seen.

[22 : 40] Something of God the Holy Spirit is put on display. When we are exercising our gifts in love and depending on God's grace and with a desire to serve others.

It's sections like these that give us the great incentive for every member ministry, where we don't just leave the work to one person or to a handful, but we recognize God has gifted each and every one of us who calls themselves a Christian.

I'm here today. And to understand that a spiritual fellowship, whether this is where you call your spiritual home or somewhere else, your spiritual fellowship is blessed and encouraged and helped when you and I are using our spiritual gifts.

It is good for God's people and it is good for God's work in the world. And so the local church then becomes a living example of true spirituality.

We're living by faith and we're living according to love. We're living our relationship with God and we're living to serve and bless God's people. That's not all he says in terms of the purpose of spiritual gifts.

[23 : 57] Look at verse 11. All these are the work of one and the same spirit and he distributes them to each one just as he determines. All these are the work of the spirit or they come, the gifts are a working of God in our lives.

And so in verses 8 to 10, we've got this gift list. And it's not the only list. You can also go to Romans chapter 12 and you can also go to Ephesians chapter 4 and you'll find examples where Paul writes down lists of spiritual gifts.

And the point is that no list is designed to be exhaustive. No list is designed to be comprehensive. It reminds us, I think in an encouraging way, that God's gifts are far more varied than we think.

It also reminds us, because if you read through all the lists, sometimes you'll find one is listed at number one, another time it's listed at number four. There is no biblical ranking system of gifts.

You are not Premier League because you have gift X and I'm championship because I've got gift Y. That's not how it works. And it also reminds us that no gift will be universal.

[25 : 10] And so we shouldn't place expectations that everybody in one group of Christians should exercise all of this particular gift all of the time. As Andrew Wilson puts it, everyone has something, but no one has everything.

And you know, one of the sad facts when you look at what's happened or what happens at times in churches, that God's gifts were always designed to promote unity. He gives gifts to bless spiritual fellowship, to strengthen that sense that we're family. But at times, it's division and debate over spiritual gifts that causes tension and breakdown within churches. And so that's when we recognize something has gone wrong. Now, what does it mean for us here today? Well, certainly, Paul would say, the Bible says, we are to be spiritual people. I don't know if that's how we think about ourselves. We think that belongs to other kinds of people. But we are to be spiritual people, but to let God define that. We are spiritual in line with biblical truth because we share fellowship with the triune God because we have faith in the Lord Jesus. [26 : 26] That's what being spiritual looks like according to the Bible. It's also really important for us to grapple with the reality that as Christians, we have a spiritual gift.

That is clear and that is biblical. God doesn't miss anyone out on the gift list. The same Father, Son, and Spirit who work together to save us are the same Father, Son, and Spirit who work together to empower us with a spiritual gift.

Following on very logically, the Bible says we must use that gift. And again, our use is defined by the Bible, not to serve ourselves, but to serve God and his people.

God's goal for us, and this kind of defines how we think about spiritual gifts, God's goal for us within a local church is that we together would be building one another up in our faith.

That we would be acting in a way to help others towards maturity. That we would be operating in such a way that we'd be extending grace to one another.

[27 : 41] Those are all the vital conditions upon which we need to operate as we think about spiritual gifts. So with that view, we have an invitation to be active as Christians.

To be asking ourselves some really basic questions. To ask ourselves, not, oh, I wonder what my spiritual gift is, and to kind of do a gift list questionnaire, I'm not sure there's that much value in that. Better start where we are. Think about what can I do today? What can I do this week to encourage another Christian? What can I do to build up someone or a group within my local church today? Those are the kind of questions, those are the kind of prayers that God loves to answer. And God will give us opportunities to be actively involved in the life of the church because this is His design. This is His purpose. He gives us these gifts so that we would use them for others. So we'll pray that God will help us in that so that we might be a church where we are serving one another according to the Spirit and for the common good.

[29 : 04] So let's take a few minutes to pray together. Let's pray. Our God and our Father, we thank You for what we have read in Your Word.

We thank You for the wisdom of Paul guiding us to think about what it means to be spiritual and how to think about spiritual gifts.

We recognize there's so much controversy in some circles and we also confess that sometimes we don't think an awful lot about it. So we thank You for the clarity and the clear instructions that Your Word hands down to us.

And so we pray that You would guide us into Your truth and we pray that we would confess in our hearts and from our mouths that Jesus is Lord and that we would recognize that spiritual gifts come from You and that we would have that desire to serve others within our local church family, within the wider Christian community.

You'd give us opportunities to encourage and build people up. That whether our gifts are public or private, whether they're really visible or invisible, Lord, they all matter to You and You have made us the way that You have made us and we thank You for that and we just pray that You would give us that spirit of humility and worship as we would look to exercise those gifts.

[30 : 35] Lord, we thank You too for the privilege that we have of prayer and we thank You that we can call on You as children to our Father in heaven. Again, we thank You for every good gift that we have received today.

Lord, we want to pray for some of the needs that we are aware of within the church and within our world. Lord, we pray for the situation we've been seeing on our TV screens in France.

Lord, we remember Willie's brother Andy and Heather in Nantes and we think of them as they do ministry while the city is engulfed by protest and violence.

Lord, we pray for the good news of the Lord Jesus to lead to peace in hearts and in lives. We thank You that He came as the Prince of Peace.

Lord, do protect and encourage them today. Lord, we also think of our students as they are continuing to be affected by the strike action. Lord, we pray for a just and a swift settlement so they could get back to a full diet of courses and classes and Lord, be with them in any anxiety or stress that can come with that.

[31:56] Enable them to work hard and to work well and to be a blessing to those around them in their classes and in their flats. Lord, we also continue to pray for little Caleb and we pray for Andrew and for Ailey and for his big sister and we pray for the wider family.

Lord, we give You thanks as we thought this morning of Jesus, our healer, Jesus, our great physician. Lord, we pray that Your hands would be healing hands.

Lord, we continue to pray that You would use treatments, You would use the care and skill of doctors and nurses. We ask that it would be truly effective and Lord, we pray at the same time You'd be ministering to the family Your love and Your comfort and Your care.

Lord, we pray that You would go with us into this new week and we thank You that You are the God who sees and knows everything so that while we don't know how this week will pan out, You do and so we pray that You'd enable us to rest and to trust in You and to seek to live for Your glory and we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.