

Discovering Spiritual Gifts, Part 1 (1 Corinthians 12-13)

Recent conversations on spiritual gifts

Merry Christmas friends, let's pray now as we come to God's Word...

So Stephanie and I were recently sitting around the table with some friends, having a good conversation, and the topic turned to spiritual gifts. Though everyone had been in church for some years, none felt like they knew their spiritual gift.

Also recently, I got a text from someone asking, "Hey Jeff, how do I discover what my spiritual gifts are?" All this got me thinking maybe it's time to talk about spiritual gifts.

I think we're sometimes tempted to avoid this topic because there are so many perspectives and experiences with spiritual gifts. So if you have any disagreements or complaints about what I share, send those to Dave@nwchurch.org, and Pastor Dave while on vacation will be glad to immediately respond to your concerns. ☺ I'm just kidding, I'm glad to engage if you'd like to explore spiritual gifts together.

Why spiritual gifts matter

Because spiritual gifts matter. Think of all the needs and kinds of support that you could use to be all that God wants you to be. And think of all the needs and kinds of support that each person in our church family could use. Then think of all the needs and kinds of support needed in our community.

I think it's clear, in the midst of so many needs, that we need every follower of Jesus here blessing people. And to bring that blessing and impact that people need, and that we want to bring, I think it's also clear that we need a power way greater than our cleverest ideas and strategies. With such great need, we need to be empowered by God Himself. Thankfully, God's Spirit has graciously gifted and empowered us for service with spiritual gifts.

When you lovingly serve in your spiritual gifting, and grow in that gifting, God will work through you to create enduring fruitfulness in your life. A fruitfulness that blesses people as you lovingly serve them in God's power and that blesses you as you experience greater joy and closeness to God as He works through you in the ways He has gifted you.

Orienting to God's Word

So it's worth taking the time to see what God's Word has to say about spiritual gifts. If you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians, chapter 12. If not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

1st Corinthians was written by Paul, an early church leader, to the church at Corinth. The Corinthian church had some wrong attitudes about and misuses of spiritual gifts. So in chapter 12 of 1st Corinthians, Paul gives guidance on spiritual gifts.

Part 1 of Teaching: Spiritual gifts...

are given by God, Who works through you –

We'll pick things up in verse 4, where Paul shares that spiritual gifts are given by God, Who works through you. **(4-7)**

⁴ There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. ⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

In verse 4 we see that spiritual gifts are given by God, that the Holy Spirit distributes to each follower of Jesus their gift. So your spiritual gift or gifts are not based on your background, education, gender, or finances, they are based on God's sovereign choice.

Then verses 5 and 6 show us that there are a variety of spiritual gifts: different kinds of service, of working. But in all the gifts it is the same God working through us to bear fruit.

So the focus is on God with spiritual gifts. He's the One Who gives us these capabilities, and He's the one working through us to impact others. Your spiritual gift or gifts are given by God, Who works through you.

In verse 7, we see that every follower of Jesus is given a spiritual gift. We all have at least one gift, and no one has all the gifts.

build up the church body – So we need each other's gifts to build up the church. Let's read again starting in verse 7. **(7-11)**

⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸ To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

Verse 7 says our spiritual gift is given for the common good. It's not to be expressed selfishly, it's designed to build the church, contributing to the common good. In verses 8-11 Paul lists some of the gifts that the Spirit distributes to build the church.

We'll talk about each one of these gifts next Sunday. But now let's focus on verses 12 – 18, where Paul compares the body of Christ, the church, to a human body. This comparison helps us to better understand how spiritual gifts build up the church. Verse 12: **(12-18)**

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. ¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.

In these verses we see that as the eye, ear, and nose are enriched by each other, so we are enriched by the diversity of gifts in Christ's body. I wouldn't want to be part of a church where everyone had a teaching gift, and no one had a mercy gift, nor part of a church where everyone had a mercy gift and no one had a teaching gift.

Like the parts of a human body, we all have functions and we need each other in Christ's body, the church. Let's be real. We all have places where we lack. I need the spiritual service of other followers of Jesus to compensate for my lack and help me to grow spiritually.

As one of my seminary professors liked to say it, “You’re doing spiritual growth wrong if you’re trying to do it on your own.” So don’t strain to be complete by yourself, as if that’s even possible. God’s Spirit gifts the other members of Christ’s body to help you.

And the Holy Spirit gifts you to build up our church body. God’s Spirit works in you, yes you, in unique ways that we need. God’s Word says every follower of Jesus is a gifted one, given a spiritual gift to serve this church body, building up our community of faith as we represent Jesus to the world.

And notice, as verse 18 says, that God does not haphazardly arrange the members of each church. He places every part of Christ’s body where He wants it to be. So there’s no room for thinking that you’re not needed here at Northwest, that your gift doesn’t matter. In the church, like in a human body, the parts are interdependent. And for this interdependence in our diversity of gifting to work well, love is required.

require love – That’s why, after covering spiritual gifts in chapter 12, Paul wraps up the chapter by saying, “And yet I will show you the most excellent way.” Now look with me at the beginning of chapter 13, where Paul describes this most excellent way: **(1-8a)**

13 If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails.

The most excellent way is the way of love. Even powerful expressions of spiritual gifts like speaking in angelic tongues and fathoming all mysteries and moving mountains and giving all away lead to nothing without love. We like to read verses 4-8 here at weddings, which is fine, but in its context, these love verses are really more about exercising our spiritual gifts so that the church body is built up rather than harmed.

For without love, we can focus on ourselves as we compare our spiritual gift with other people’s spiritual gifts. And we’ll likely get prideful or feel discouraged, depending on how we

think we measure up to other's gifting. But as verse 4 says, "love does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud."

And without love, we'll also tend to use our gifts selfishly. Let's say you've got a teaching gift, and you hear someone share something about God's Word that isn't quite right, and your "theological Spidey sense" is going crazy.

Will you lovingly seek to exercise your teaching gift here, focused on God and serving the needs of that other person as you discern what to say or not say? Or, will you exercise your teaching gift in a way that dishonors the other person, thinking about resolving the theological tension you feel and showing off what you know? Verse 5 says that love does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking.

So some of us today may need to confess to God and apologize to someone here for misusing our spiritual gift. Some of us may need to work on forgiving someone who harmed us by misusing their spiritual gift. As verse 5 says: "love keeps no record of wrongs."

And further, love is also required with spiritual gifts because without love, we'll be tempted to excuse never serving in areas difficult for us. For example, you or I may not have the spiritual gift of giving or the gift of mercy, but that doesn't mean it's okay for us to never give to the church or to never be merciful to others, though it'll be harder for us than for someone with those spiritual gifts of giving and mercy. We're all called to serve at times in ways that are challenging for us. As verse 7 encourages us, "love always perseveres."

Spiritual gifts also require love because without love, we'll be tempted to judge each other. Say someone here has the gift of faith and spends a lot of time praying. And someone else has the gift of mercy and spends a lot of time serving the poor.

The first could be tempted to judge the second, saying, or at least thinking, "You spend that little time each week in prayer!? You're such a 'Martha', you should spend more time with Jesus."

The other might shoot back, or at least think to themselves, "God's heart is close to the poor. How can you act like you're a committed Christian when you helped our church outreach to the poor just once this year?"

But rather than judge one another, thinking, "what's wrong with you, why aren't you passionate about what I'm passionate about" it'll go much better as we apply verse 7, "love always trusts and always hopes." And verse 4, "love is kind."

People count the spiritual gifts in the New Testament differently, but there are about 20 listed, so that's 20 different ministry emphases you might have in a church, not to mention the times when people with the same gift focus on different things. So with all these many different priorities and passions and gifts, you're probably seeing why love is emphasized with spiritual gifts here in 1 Corinthians. And love is also part of the other three primary spiritual gift passages.

In Romans chapter 12, right after covering spiritual gifts, the very next verses say, “⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.”

And Ephesians chapter 4 talks about love soon before and after covering spiritual gifts. And in 1 Peter chapter 4, right before discussing spiritual gifts, Peter says, “⁸ Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.” So don't miss how important love is to exercising spiritual gifts.

Part 2 of Teaching: Aids to discovering spiritual gift(s)...

Prayerfully study biblical teaching – But what if you're not sure what your gift is? As that text message asked me, “How do I discover what my spiritual gifts are?”

Interestingly, the New Testament doesn't directly answer that question. It instead focuses on the things we've been talking about: that spiritual gifts are given by God, Who works through you; that we all have at least one spiritual gift and need each other's gifts to build up the body; and how spiritual gifts require love.

When it comes to discovering your spiritual gifts, I'll suggest two main things. First, prayerfully study the Bible's teaching on spiritual gifts. We've been doing that this morning, and we'll do more next Sunday. So if you've been thinking this morning, “I've never heard of that gift you just mentioned.” Or, “I don't know all the gifts” come back next Sunday.

As you engage with the Bible's teaching on spiritual gifts, whether here on Sunday morning or another time, do it prayerfully. Ask God to help you to rightly understand His Word and see how He wants to speak through it to help you to exercise your spiritual gift.

Try serving, paying attention to input and impact - The second main thing for discovering your spiritual gift is to try various kinds of service and ministry. Dr. Robert Clinton from Fuller

Seminary has studied a great deal on spiritual gifts and Christian leaders.¹ And he's found that typically a follower of Jesus doesn't know ahead of time their spiritual gift and then start exercising it. Rather, the most common pattern is that a believer has ministry experience where they start using their gift without realizing it's a spiritual gift, and then later on they discover that it's their gift.

So seek to serve others in love in a variety of ways, informally as you see needs, and by trying some of the ministries of the church. As you serve, pay attention to the input and impact that emerges, which are clues to how God is working through you.

Input - Take note if you hear similar input. If people give you similar input on how you helped them or keep asking you to be part of the same kinds of ministry efforts, that input may point to a spiritual gift.

Like say over time that people tell you that your words really encouraged their faith when they were struggling, and how something you shared helped them to live out their faith in a practical way; if you're getting that kind of input, then you may have the spiritual gift of exhortation.

Now as you reflect on the input you receive, keep in mind that spiritual gifts can be cultivated. If you saw the first time I led a small group Bible study, or the first time I gave a message, you might not have thought I had the gift of teaching. You still might not be so sure I have the gift of teaching. 😊

So if you don't immediately get positive input when serving in a new way, don't immediately conclude that you don't have that spiritual gift. It may take time for you to receive that input.

As you pay attention to input, keep in mind that people express the same spiritual gift in different ways. If you mistakenly think that the only way the gift of evangelism is expressed is by sharing the gospel with a stadium full of people, then you'll miss it when others share input that shows your expression of the gift of evangelism.

Like someone from your small group sharing, "You know, every time we take prayer requests, yours is always about someone you're hoping to lead to Jesus." Or someone seeing you share the gospel with your waiter and telling you afterwards, "You're so good at initiating spiritual conversations and sharing the gospel, I don't know how you do it."

¹ Everything from Dr. Clinton in the message is found in his book *The Making of a Leader*, 2nd edition.

When it comes to input, not only can it help you discover your spiritual gift, but you can give input that helps others to discover their spiritual gift. So let's be the kind of church family that affirms each other, making it a point to share with each other when we see gifting. Remember, it's not just about you taking next steps with Jesus, it's about you helping others to take next steps with Jesus.

As you pay attention to input, one more thing. Think about whose input you're drawn to seek out. As Dr. Clinton studied spiritual gifts and leadership in the church, one common pattern he found with spiritual gifts is that "like attracts like". So if there's a specific believer that you're just drawn to and want to get input from, you may be drawn to them because you share a spiritual gift.

With hindsight, Dr. Clinton realized that this pattern in his research was also at work in his life. Before he got clarity on his three spiritual gifts, Dr. Clinton realized that there were four Christian leaders he had been really drawn to over the years and developed good relationships with; and in hindsight, he realized that he shared at least one spiritual gift with all four.

Impact – So that's input, and as you serve, you'll also want to pay attention to impact. Try to notice how you see God using you to impact others in positive ways. If every time you get involved with a ministry, it gets better organized, then maybe you've got the gift of administration.

And pay attention not only to how you're impacting others, pay attention to how you're impacted as you serve. What bothers you and what brings you joy are clues to God's work through you.

For example, if every time you get involved with a ministry, you either think, "I'm so glad we're organized" or "Why can't we get more organized around here!?" your focus on the organization, or lack thereof, may be a clue that you have the gift of administration. And if you also find joy in helping the people and processes involved in a ministry to get more organized to fulfill the ministry's mission, then I bet you've got the gift of administration.

As you notice what bothers you and what brings you joy in ministry, don't limit yourself to only thinking directly about the spiritual gifts, also pay attention to complimentary characteristics. For example, back in college, my church invited me to serve in leadership. The leadership application included doctrinal questions like "How would you describe the Trinity?"

I had never filled out something like that before, and I ended up spending hours looking up tons of verses and writing multiple paragraphs for each one of the questions and was just enjoying myself in a way only a newly christened Bible nerd could. ☺

But I don't think I really realized how unique that was until a couple of years later, when I interned at the same church. Now I was the one reading the applications for the new leaders, and I was struck by how many of their answers to the questions like "How would you describe the Trinity?" were one sentence long with one Scripture reference.

Like say, "God is one God who exists in three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit (Matthew 28)." Where my application's answer a few years earlier got into all kinds of detail about the Trinity and had a bunch of verses.

Now if you look at the spiritual gifts listed in the New Testament, there's no gift of Bible learning, but there are spiritual gifts that will operate much more effectively if a person knows the Bible well, like say the gift of teaching, or the gift of wisdom.

So something that brings you joy, like perhaps Bible study, or something that frustrates you when it's not done well, may not directly identify your spiritual gift, but may still be a clue because it compliments your spiritual gift. Like say God giving someone with the gift of teaching a strong desire for His Word.

Next Step

Now this morning we've seen that spiritual gifts are given by God, Who works through you; that spiritual gifts build up the church body; and that spiritual gifts require love.

If you don't yet know your spiritual gift, try serving, in informal ways, and by trying various ministries over time. As you serve, pay attention to the input and impact that emerges.

That's our next step this morning for those who don't yet know their spiritual gift. Serve, paying attention to input and impact. If you don't yet know your gift, don't let that stop you from serving. The Bible tells us that every follower of Jesus is already gifted by God, and as you serve in love, God will work through you to bless others and will guide you.

If instead you already know your spiritual gift or gifts, then your next step this morning is to exercise them in love.

There's nothing greater than knowing and serving Jesus, and we need your gifts for that pursuit. The fewer of us exercising our gifts, the weaker our church body will be. Our families, our small groups, our ministries, our church, our community needs your gifts.

And that includes the gifts of everyone livestreaming. God bless you for the many ways that you're bringing your gifts in virtual Bible studies, prayer times, and ESL, and as you call each other and mail cards, and as you give financially and donate to the food pantry, and much, much more. God is pleased by your faithfulness in continuing to engage with the body, even as you experience difficulties and limitations in this season.

We need your gifts to build up this body. So if you've reached a point where your only engagement with the church family is the livestream, please don't wait around for someone in our church to engage with you again. Connect and serve here in some way that you're comfortable with in this COVID season, because we need you.

And I thank God that so many of you are bringing your gifts, virtually and in person, to bless this body of Christ and our community as the very Spirit of God works through us, bringing impact that will carry into eternity. Let's pray now about that...