

GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

BY JOHN PIPER

Some might tell you not to really desire all the spiritual gifts. But when you say that, it does not seem to do justice to what 1 Corinthians 12–14 really says.

The apostle bookends his famous chapter on love (1 Corinthians 13) with these two (perhaps surprising) charges: “earnestly desire the higher gifts” and “earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy” (1 Corinthians 12:31; 1 Corinthians 14:1).

God means that we desire all of his gifts, not to glut our selfishness, but to selflessly strengthen others — “so that the church may be built up” (1 Corinthians 14:5).

Here are ten ways and reasons from the New Testament to desire all the spiritual gifts, not just the comfortable ones.

- 1 Desire all the spiritual gifts because you desire God himself. “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7).
- 2 Desire all the spiritual gifts, knowing that “the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13; cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:3). Compared to other “higher gifts” (such as tongues, healing, and prophecy† among others), love is “a still more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31).
- 3 Desire all the spiritual gifts because you need him to overcome the satanic fear that dwells in your heart (2 Timothy 1:6–7). As Sam Storms writes, “My opposition to spiritual gifts was also energized by fear . . . [like] the fear of what might occur were I fully to relinquish control of my life and mind and emotions to the Holy Spirit” (The Beginner’s Guide to Spiritual Gifts, 10).
- 4 Desire all the spiritual gifts, knowing that discernment is needed. “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:19–20). “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1; cf. 1 Corinthians 14:29–32).
- 5 Therefore, desire all the spiritual gifts, knowing that good things can be twisted and corrupted. But, as Storms says, “abuse is no excuse for disuse” (Convergence: The Spiritual Journeys of a Charismatic Calvinist, 206).
- 6 Desire all the spiritual gifts because God commands it (1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:1, 39). In fact, God tells us, “Do not forbid speaking in tongues” (1 Corinthians 14:39) and, “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies” (1 Thessalonians 5:19–20).

- 7 Desire all the spiritual gifts, knowing that “all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40).
- 8 Desire all the spiritual gifts because you long for God’s people to be as built up and encouraged and consoled as is pleasing to him (1 Corinthians 14:3). In fact, “since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church” (1 Corinthians 14:12). In other words, desire the gift of prophecy in order to build up and encourage and console others, in order to have a greater manifestation of the Spirit of God himself.
- 9 Desire all the spiritual gifts, knowing that prophesying and casting out demons is no sure sign of being known by God (Matthew 7:22–23).
- 10 Desire all the spiritual gifts, knowing that suffering will come. First, just as God did with Paul, he may choose to afflict you so that you might not become wickedly proud because of your great giftings (2 Corinthians 12:7). Secondly, the world, the flesh, and the devil will all fight against a greater manifestation of God through his Spirit in your life because of these gifts.

†Storms writes, “The gift of tongues is simply the Spirit-energized ability to pray, worship, give thanks or speak in a language other than your own or one you might have learned in school” (Beginner’s Guide, 151), and new-covenant prophecy is “the human report of a divine revelation.’

Prophecy is the speaking forth in merely human words of something God has spontaneously brought to mind” (110).

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed" (1 Corinthians 12:1).

I assume that applies to us also: we ought not to be uninformed about the nature and purpose of spiritual gifts. So this final message in our series on the Holy Spirit will deal with this subject. Instead of spreading myself too thin across 1 Corinthians 12, 13, and 14 (the major section on spiritual gifts), I have chosen to focus on several smaller texts so that we can examine their teaching more closely.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS STRENGTHEN FAITH IN OTHERS

If you were reading through the New Testament, the first place you would run into the term "spiritual gift" is Romans 1:11, 12. Let's look at this text together. Writing to the church at Rome, Paul says, "I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine."

The translation "impart to you some spiritual gift" is misleading because it sounds like Paul wants to help them have a gift, but the text actually means that he wants to give

them the benefit of his gifts. "I long to see you, that I may use my gifts to strengthen you."

The first and most obvious thing we learn from this text is that spiritual gifts are for strengthening others. This, of course, does not mean that the person who has a spiritual gift gets no joy or benefit from it. (We will see differently in a moment.)

But it does suggest that gifts are given to be given. They are not given to be hoarded. "I desire to share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you."

What does strengthen mean? He's not referring to bodily strength but strength of faith.

The same word is used in 1 Thessalonians 3:2, where Paul says, We sent Timothy, our brother and servant in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen you in your faith and to exhort you that no one be moved by these afflictions.

To strengthen someone by a spiritual gift means to help their faith not give way as easily when trouble enters their life. We have spiritual gifts in order to help other people keep the faith and maintain an even keel in life's storms.

If there is anybody around you whose faith is being threatened in any way at all, take stock whether you may have a spiritual gift peculiarly suited to strengthen that person.

KNOWING OUR GIFTS AND DESIRING TO STRENGTHEN OTHERS

I think it would be fair to say also from this text that you shouldn't bend your mind too much trying to label your spiritual gift before you use it.

That is, don't worry about whether you can point to prophecy, or teaching, or wisdom, or knowledge, or healing, or miracles, or mercy, or administration, etc., and say, "That's mine."

The way to think is this: The reason we have spiritual gifts is so that we can strengthen other people's faith; here is someone whose faith is in jeopardy; how can I help him? Then do or say what seems most helpful, and if the person is helped, then you may have discovered one of your gifts.

If you warned him of the folly of his way and he repented, then perhaps you have the gift of "warning."

If you took a walk with her and said you knew what she was going through and lifted her hope, then perhaps you have the gift of "empathy." If you had them over to your home when they were new and lonely, then perhaps you have the gift of "hospitality."

We must not get hung up on naming our gifts. The thing to get hung up on is, "Are we doing what we can do to strengthen the faith of the people around us?"

I really believe that the problem of not knowing our spiritual gifts is not a basic problem. More basic is the problem of not desiring very much to strengthen other people's faith.

Human nature is more prone to tear down than it is to build up.

The path of least resistance leads to grumbling and criticism and gossip, and many there be that follow it. But the gate is narrow and the way is strewn with obstacles which leads to edification and the strengthening of faith.

So the basic problem is becoming the kind of person who wakes up in the morning, thanks God for our great salvation, and then says, "Lord, O how I want to strengthen people's faith today.

Grant that at the end of this day somebody will be more confident of your promises and more joyful in your grace because I crossed his path."

The reason I say becoming this kind of person is more basic than finding out your spiritual gift is that when you become this kind of person, the Holy Spirit will not let your longings go to waste. He will help you find ways to strengthen the faith of others, and that will be the discovery of your gifts. So let's apply ourselves to becoming the kind of people more and more who long to strengthen each other's faith.

SPIRIT-WROUGHT FAITH ENCOURAGING THE FAITH OF OTHERS

Now, in Romans 1:12 Paul restates verse 11 in different words: I want to strengthen you with my spiritual gift, "that is, I want us to be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine." Paul does two things here.

First, he uses the old "It's my pleasure" tactic. You remember my sermon on Christian hedonism and humility? I argued that when we say, "It's my pleasure," after doing someone a favor, it is an expression of humility.

It is like saying, "Don't get too excited about my self-sacrifice; I'm just doing what I like to do." When Paul rereads Romans 1:11, he probably says, "Hmmm, that may sound a bit presumptuous, as if I'm the great martyr doing all for their sake, when in fact I look forward to a great encouragement from them for myself."

So as he restates verse 11 in verse 12, he adds that he, too, and not just they, is going to be helped when they meet. That is the first thing he does.

The second thing he does is show that the way he will strengthen their faith by his spiritual gift (verse 11) is by encouraging them with his faith. In verse 11 he aims to strengthen them; in verse 12 he aim to encourage them. In verse 11 he strengthens faith by his spiritual gift; in verse 12 he encourages by his faith. The conclusion I draw from these parallels is this: a spiritual gift is an expression of faith which aims to strengthen faith. It is activated from faith in us and aims for faith in another. Another way

to put it would be this: A spiritual gift is an ability given by the Holy Spirit to express our faith effectively (in word or deed) for the strengthening of someone else's faith.

It is helpful to me to think about spiritual gifts in this way because it keeps me from simply equating them with natural abilities.

Many unbelievers have great abilities in teaching and in administration, for example. And these abilities are God-given, whether the people recognize this or not.

But these would not be called "spiritual gifts" of teaching or administration because they are not expressions of faith and they are not aiming to strengthen faith.

Our faith in the promises of God is the channel through which the Spirit flows on his way to strengthening the faith of others (Galatians 3:5). Therefore, no matter what abilities we have, if we are not relying on God and not aiming to help others rely on him, then our ability is not a "spiritual gift."

It is not "spiritual" because the Holy Spirit is not flowing through it from faith to faith.

This has tremendous implications for how we choose church staff and church officers and board members. It means that we will never simply ask, "Who has the skill to be efficient?" We will always go beyond that and ask, "Do they use their skill in such a way that you can tell it is an expression of their hearty reliance on the Lord? And do they exercise their skill with a view to strengthening the faith and joy of others?"

A church where the Holy Spirit is alive and powerful will be a church very sensitive to the difference between natural abilities and spiritual gifts.

ANY VIRTUE USED BY THE SPIRIT TO STRENGTHEN FAITH

Now let's go on to Romans 12:3–8, a unit dealing in a bit more detail with spiritual gifts, though they are only called "gifts" here.

By the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him . . . Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (verses. 3, 6–8)

I will only draw your attention to two things. First, I believe this text confirms the earlier point that we shouldn't get too lathered up about whether we can label our gifts or not. Spiritual gifts are not a limited and defined group of activities spelled out in the New Testament. Rather, spiritual gifts are any ability the Spirit gives you to express your faith in order to strengthen another person.

Notice the last four mentioned in verse 8: "exhorting" (or comforting, encouraging — it's the same word used back in 1:12), "contributing" (or sharing), "giving aid" (may mean "presiding"), and "acts of mercy." The remarkable thing about these (with the possible exception of "presiding") is that all believers are called to do these: exhort, give, be merciful. So the "gift" must be that some are enabled by the Spirit to do it more heartily and effectively and frequently than others. So any virtue at all in the believer's life which he is enabled to do with zest and with benefit to others can be called his gift.

GIVEN IN VARYING MEASURE

The second thing I want to point out from this text is that both the gifts we have and the faith to exercise them are given to us by God in varying measure. The reason Paul teaches this truth is to help us think soberly about ourselves and not too highly.

The gifted are always in danger of pride — it was a terrible problem at Corinth (and perhaps at Rome, too). So Paul uncovers a profound truth that is intended to blow away all pride — all self-reliance or boasting.

He says in verse 6 that we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us. In other words, any distinction that sets you off from others in ability is owing to grace — i.e., it is freely given and not earned or deserved. So you can't boast in it.

But someone might say, "OK, I can't boast in what gift I have, but I can boast in the zeal with which I use it." That's like the person who says, "Well, I can't boast that I was born in America, but I can boast that I used my freedom to be productive and get rich." Both of those statements are wrong.

Moses said to Israel in Deuteronomy 8:17,
Beware lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth." You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.

(And he, incidentally, will hold us accountable for using it to help the disadvantaged, rather than padding our lives with luxury.)

And in a similar way Paul says here in Romans 12:3,
Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned to him.

So not only the gift but the measure of faith we have to exercise the gift is a gift from God. And God has revealed this to us not to lessen our hunger and yearning for great faith, but to humble us and cause us to look to him for everything. God has done all things "so that no human being might boast in his presence . . .

Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:29, 31). Few things keep our pride quelled and our thinking about ourselves sober and humble like the awareness that the Spirit of God is absolutely sovereign and gives both the gifts and the faith to use

them to whomever he pleases, in whatever degree he pleases, for the upbuilding of his body.

The church should be the humblest and happiest fellowship on the earth.

EACH HAS RECEIVED A GIFT

1 Peter 4:10-11, one of my favorite texts. I want to make four brief observations about spiritual gifts on the basis of these two verses. Let's read them.

As each has received a gift, employ it for one another (or serve it up to one another) as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.

First, note that "each has received a gift." Gifts are not for a few but for all, and every believer has abilities which the Holy Spirit has given and can use to strengthen others. And it is the supreme joy of life to discover what they are and then pour yourself out to others through these gifts. And you will find them if you really desire to be God's instrument in bringing about faith and joy in other people. That, you recall, is the fundamental problem.

STEWARDS OF THE CURRENCY OF GRACE

Second, the picture we have in verse 10 is of a house with variously talented stewards who are given the owner's funds to administer. The house is the church, the stewards are all of you, the various talents are all our varied gifts, the funds are God's grace, and the administration is the exercise of our gifts.

The most striking part of this comparison is the analogy between the owner's funds and God's grace. Grace is the currency in the household of God.

We are called to be stewards of grace. We have a board of stewards in the Minnesota Baptist Conference, and they are given the responsibility to receive and disburse thousands of dollars for the household called the Minnesota Baptist Conference.

That's the way we should think of our responsibility in the church — all of us. We are recipients of grace, and it is our duty to disburse this grace for others. The vehicle by which we make these disbursements is our spiritual gift. So now we have another definition of spiritual gifts: they are abilities by which we receive the grace of God and disburse that grace to others.

This fits beautifully with our earlier definition of spiritual gifts as the abilities given by the Spirit which express our faith and aim to strengthen the faith of others. They fit together because faith is what the house owner wants in all his stewards, and grace is the only currency that can purchase faith.

Or, to change the image, faith feeds on grace and is strengthened by grace. God gives us his grace in Christ and all the promises that are "Yes" in him, and our response is faith; then we, in the exercise of our spiritual gifts, disburse that grace to others and thus feed their faith.

It is the free and precious grace that strengthens the heart in faith (Hebrews 13:9). So, what should be happening at Bethlehem Baptist Church is that all God's stewards — all of you — should be waking up to more and more of God's grace that you have in Christ, and finding more and more ways to creatively disburse that grace to each other and to those outside by the use of your spiritual gifts.

O, that the Spirit might cause a wheeling and dealing in the currency of grace at Bethlehem Baptist Church!

WORD-ORIENTED AND DEED-ORIENTED GIFTS

The third observation from 1 Peter 4:11 is that grace can be disbursed through gifts which are word-oriented or deed-oriented. "Whoever speaks (let him do it) as one who utters oracles of God."

If your gift involves speaking, do not rely on your own insight, but look to God to give his words through you. We impart grace to our listener only if we give them a word of God. It may not be an exact word of Scripture, but a word prompted and guided by God, so that attention is directed to him, not us. Our aim is to strengthen faith, and he is the infinitely trustworthy hope-giver, not us.

Then it says, "Whoever renders service (let him do it) as one who renders it by the strength which God supplies." So, if your gift involves practical deeds of service, do not try to do them in your own strength.

For then your gift will cease to be a "spiritual gift." It must come from faith and reliance on grace in order to be a "spiritual gift."

So then grace can be disbursed to other people either by gifts of word or gifts of deed, if we speak with the words and act with the strength that God supplies.

ALL FOR THE GLORY OF GOD

The final point from this text, and my final one this morning, is that the aim of all spiritual gifts is "that in everything God might be glorified through Jesus Christ" (v. 11).

This means that God's aim in giving us gifts, and in giving us the faith to exercise them, is that his glory might be displayed. He wants us and the world to marvel at him and to think he is fantastic.

The stupendous reality of God is all encompassing. "For from him and through him and to him are all things" (Romans 11:36). And there is nothing more thrilling, more joyful, more meaningful, more satisfying than to find our niche in the eternal unfolding of God's

glory. Our gift may look small, but as a part of the revelation of God's infinite glory it takes on stupendous proportions.