

## The Unity of the Body

1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-11

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I will be performing two weddings over the next 5 months. One thing I have noticed of many years of doing this is that quite a few couples want 1 Corinthians 13, the “Love Chapter”, read during the ceremony. While there is nothing wrong with this, the context in which 1 Corinthians 13 is written really doesn’t fit a wedding. Yes the characteristics of love written in chapter 13 are true in marriage, but the true context of the chapter is in regards to confusion in the Corinthian church. So, this short series gives me an opportunity to present the “Love Chapter” in context.

This morning we will begin a four week series as we look at first Corinthians chapter 12 and 13.

As we begin this morning I want to look at our text over the next four weeks in a broader context. The letter was originally written to the church at Corinth, located in Greece, while Paul was ministering in Ephesus, which is in present-day Turkey.

Regarding the Christians who were part of the church in this place, Paul tells us in chapter 1

- that they had been sanctified (1:2),
- that they were recipients of the grace of God (1:4),
- that many of the people in the church at Corinth were gifted by God (1:5-7).

In the first 12 chapters, Paul deals with a number of issues that were going on in the church and lives of the people there.

For example, he wrote that he had heard that some of the people in the church were manifesting pride and arrogance.

- Others were guilty of immorality, and the church wasn’t handling the situation rightly.
- He covered other topics such as the matter of believers taking other believers to court,
- marriage and divorce concerns,
- Christian liberty issues,
- and idolatry.
- He helped the Corinthian church, and us, understand why we feel and behave as badly as we sometimes do.
- He explained issues related to relationships between men and women as well as relationships in the church, including how we are to practice the Lords table.

### **CONFUSED ABOUT SPIRITUAL GIFTS**

Chapter 12 indicates they were confused about the gifts of the spirit. They considered those in possession of some of the more spectacular gifts more important or more personally holy than others in the church. They didn’t seem to comprehend why everyone couldn’t have all the gifts.

Jonathan Edwards in his book, “Charity and its Fruits”, makes an interesting observation.

“The extraordinary gifts of the spirit, such as the gift of tongues, or miracles, of prophecy, etc., are called extraordinary, because they are not given in the ordinary course of God’s providence. They are not bestowed in the way of God’s ordinary providential dealing with his children, but only on extraordinary occasions, as they were bestowed on the prophets and apostles to enable them to reveal the mind and will of God.

It may be observed then, that the distinction of the gifts of the spirit into ordinary and extraordinary, is very different from the other distinction into common and special; for some of the ordinary gifts, such as faith, hope, charity, are not common gifts.

They are such gifts as God ordinarily bestows on his church in all ages, but they are not common to the godly and the ungodly; they are peculiar to the godly.

The extraordinary gifts of the spirit are common gifts the gifts of tongues, of miracles, of prophecy, etc., although they are not ordinarily bestowed on the Christian church, but only on extraordinary occasions, yet are not peculiar to the godly, for many ungodly men have had these gifts.”

John MacArthur writes, “The Corinthian church was basically carnal, basically chaotic, there was little order going on there. They were plagued by every conceivable trial, and every conceivable turmoil, and every conceivable sin was manifesting itself. They had managed to pervert the life of the church in every way possible and that included spiritual gifts. Their society was drowning in the sea of the mystery religions. They were characterized by two words: ecstasy and enthusiasm, which spoke of the non-rational, ecstatic, orgiastic-kind of trancelike activity that occurred as the highest level, supposedly, of religious experience.

As a result of this, hysterical extremism and delusions regarding the true gifts had infiltrated the church at Corinth and they were now confused. Their public worship had turned into a disaster; an exercise in selfishness, gluttony, drunkenness, ecstatic frenzies, as Satan was busy counterfeiting the gifts and carnal people were left in confusion as to what was real and what was not. They had exalted the ecstatic, and they had come to the perversion of the gift of languages, particularly, into ecstatic speech and this became their major abuse. As a result of all of this some had written to Paul and said, "Will you help us straighten this mess out?" And so he writes chapters 12 to 14 in response to the fearful marriage of the frenzy of the mystery religions in the truth of the grace gifts to the Spirit of God that had come often in Corinthian assembly.”

Let’s read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 together.

12 Now concerning spiritual gifts brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. 2 You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led.

3 Therefore 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.

4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

## **SAVED TO SERVE**

It is clear from Scripture that we have been saved to serve.

Not one of us is redeemed by Christ in order that we be inactive and stagnant in regards to ministry. God has assigned a special position to each and every one of us, to serve him. And more than that, God not only has a place for us to serve, but has given us each a special spiritual gift. This is the nature of spiritual gifts. It is about us discovering our place in the body of Christ and fulfilling what God has ordained for us to do. It is indeed, us taking part in Ephesians 2:10, the work that God has prepared for us from eternity past.

I believe that part of the account that we will give in the final day, when we stand before Christ, is how well we used the gift that God had given us to build his kingdom.

Verse 1 is obviously in response to the question that has been proposed. Since he is taking three chapters to discuss it, it must be critical for us to understand.

## **So, what is a spiritual gift?**

A spiritual gift is different than a natural talent. A spiritual gift is not a natural talent, it is a supernatural talent. It is not given to us at our natural birth, as our natural talents, but it is given to us at our supernatural birth as a supernatural talent.

This gift is entrusted to us at some point after our conversion. It is our job then to discover that gift and to use that gift throughout the remainder of our natural lives. And Paul does not want them to be ignorant or unaware of what these gifts are and what the purpose of these gifts entail.

A spiritual gift is a supernatural gift given to members of Christ's church that allow them to better serve one another. In a very real sense, a spiritual gift is a channel in which the Holy Spirit ministers to us through us in the service of one another.

## **Their Past Lives**

Verses two and three are talking about their past, prior to their conversion. They were involved in pagan temples, involved in pagan worship, and totally immersed in the worship of dumb, mute idols. In this, they were led astray. According to chapter 10, they sacrificed to these idols. They were led by their sinful flesh. Drunkenness, religious prostitutes, diviners, chanters, gurus, anything that would stimulate the senses – it was out of control. And some of these practices had worked their way into the church at Corinth.

## The Genuineness of Faith

So verse 3 sets a theological cornerstone and it separates the sheep from the goats. It isn't about saying the words. It is about the genuineness of their heart.

Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 7:15-23, *"15 'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. 21 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'*

One cannot truly confess the truth of verse three unless the Holy Spirit is actively at work within them.

So, how do we know when we're looking at the Spirit, when we're seeing the Spirit, when we're sensing the Spirit? It seems the Apostle Paul puts a test on the table.

First of all, God's Spirit works through believers to proclaim Jesus' glory. We have seen that in verse 2-3.

Secondly, God's Spirit works through all believers in many different ways (verses 4-7). *"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."*

One of the things that we identify periodically as being helpful for interpretation and meaning and finding a point in the text is repetition. Did you notice, when I read verses 4 through 7, some things keep rising to the surface?

The words "varieties" and "same" keep showing up. There are different kinds of words—different descriptors all around them—but those are the constants all the way through those verses. There are varieties of gifts, same Spirit; varieties of service, same Lord; varieties of activities, same God who empowers them all in every one. Why? Because this is the nature of the Spirit.

There is one Spirit that has baptized us, made us part of one body, but he manifests himself in many different ways.

Finally, God's Spirit works primarily to benefit the body, not the believer. We are talking about the individual believer who possesses a particular spiritual gift.

How do we know that? Because that emphasis keeps showing up when you look at these different passages that talk about spiritual gifts. There is this emphasis that the Spirit's target is the body as a group.

John Piper explained that verse 7 emphasizes that.

*"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit **for the common good.**" (v7)*

- "Each" So who are these each?  
They are those who once were pagans led away from Christ by idols in verses 2 and 3. But all that has changed because of the work of the Spirit. The "each" of verse 7 are people who have ceased treating Jesus as a curse to be rejected and now follow him as Lord. So the essence of who the "each" are is the Lordship of Jesus. And all this comes from the Spirit. It cannot be experienced except by the Spirit of God. The Spirit's main business in the world is to glorify Jesus and make his lordship real in people's lives.
- "the Spirit"  
Look at the major emphasis of this passage summarized in verse 11  
This verse emphasizes two things.
  1. There is one spirit behind all the gifts.  
Remember in verse 4, "There are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit."  
Now look at Verses 8-9.
  2. According to verse 11, the spirit decides who gets what. The spirit is sovereign.
- "manifestation"  
The reason the Spirit gives the gifts and the ministries and the effectiveness that he does is so that he will be manifested in the church. A manifestation is a showing. When you manifest something you bring it to light. You put it forward for people to see.
- "for the common good"  
For what purpose does the spirit manifest? For the common good. The Holy Spirit doesn't give gifts so that we can boast. He gives gifts for two reasons.
  1. He gives gifts that help us do good to each other in the church
  2. He gives gifts for the glory of God.

### **Examples of Gifts**

In verses 8-10, Paul gives some representative examples. Why does he give those examples? To remind them, and us, they all come from one Spirit for the common good of the body." He doesn't list all the gifts that are even listed in other places in Scripture. He's just giving some examples and really saying, "It doesn't matter what it is, it comes from the Spirit."

### **Conclusion**

"All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills." (v11)

This verse is a fitting conclusion to this text. Despite the diversity of all these gifts, it is one and the same Holy Spirit who works or energizes all of them – and it is for the good of the entire body.

Several years ago, two students graduated from the Chicago-Kent College of Law. The highest ranking student in the class was a blind man named Overton and, when he received his honor, he insisted that half the credit should go to his friend, Kasprzyzak. They had met one another in

school when the armless Mr. Kasprzyzak had guided the blind Mr. Overton down a flight of stairs. This acquaintance ripened into friendship and a beautiful example of interdependence. The blind man carried the books which the armless man read aloud in their common study, and thus the individual deficiency of each was compensated for by the other. After their graduation, they planned to practice law together.

The Corinthians needed to learn that the ultimate purpose for which God gives spiritual gifts to his people, whether ordinary or extraordinary, is not to exalt the person who has them or to impress or entertain others.

The ultimate purpose is that the body of believers might be built up in love. Ephesians 4:11-16 reinforces this point, and we will close with it this morning: *“11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 **Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 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.”***