

GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT: THERE ARE LOTS OF THEM! I Corinthians 12: 1-12

Week two in our series, "Gifts of the Spirit."

Just a brief recap: definition of Gifts of the Spirit:

Gifts of the Spirit are special abilities given by Christ through the Holy Spirit to empower believers for the ministries of the body.
REPEAT

I have intentionally shifted the language from Spiritual Gifts to Gifts of the Spirit. My reason is biblical as I learned this past week in studying this passage. In the Greek, Paul does not talk about spiritual gifts. Instead, he is speaking about the matters relating to the Spirit. You see he is making a contrast with what is going on in the Corinthian Congregation. Note verses 2 and 3: Paul is making a contrast between former and current spiritual realities of the Corinthian people. In the past, they were misled to worship idols -- and the idols, of course, were speechless. Verse 2 declares, "When you were pagans, you were somehow influenced and led astray by mute idols." They were caught up in searching for something that gave them hope or something that had meaning for their lives. And they were willing to 'listen' to idols which did not speak.

I often wonder if we have really come very far from the experiences of the New Testament. All were searching for meaning and purpose. All wanted and want today some direction. Often we are misled by people or movements which we hope will make sense for us.

Remember back in the 80's, I think it was? Jim Jones led a group of believers to the Caribbean for what was to be the promised land? They believed in him so much that they drank the poison and many men, women, and children died. They put their trust in his spiritual teachings which led to their demise. Not a stone idol, but he was an idol.

Today I am amazed at how many people put all their trust and their financial well-being into the prosperity Gospel. If you will just send our ministry \$1,000 God will prosper you and you will be financially secure is the pitch that is given to followers. They provide testimonials and witnesses of how people who made that commitment prospered, but they never mention the people who lost their shirt!

I read a survey this week of the 20 richest pastors. Some of the people were worth \$150 million dollars and more. One was said to be worth \$750 million. I was taken by the fact that 4 or 5 pastors listed reside in Africa and were worth more than \$10 million.

It's evidence that we seek out modern day idols to take care of our needs and desires. Paul is simply making the point that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God will say "Jesus be cursed!" In the like manner, no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

He was saying to them that the Holy Spirit is real, that the Holy Spirit communicates, speaks, and is in relationship with us versus an idol that is muted.

In that context, Paul is declaring to the Corinthians as well as to us several things:

(1) The purpose of the Gifts of the Spirit is not to set individuals apart. It is not to grant celebrity status to a few people who seem to be better than the rest of us. No, gifts of the Spirit are intended to build up the church, the ministry.

We are not singled out for how good we are at hospitality or administration, or at praying or at having a strong faith. No, the issue is how does the gift we possess further God's Kingdom and strengthen and empower the local congregation. What does it do to make a difference at South Plains rather than on my resume.

(2) Which leads to a further observation

that what I do or what Gifts I have, have been given in order to glorify God. They are intended to make a difference for God. To make a difference because of God. To make a difference in praise of God. Gifts of the spirit are all about God: the giver and perfecter of every gift!

Part of God's Gifts of the Spirit to us is the joy and satisfaction they bring us. I mentioned last week that a very spiritual moment in our lives is when we come to realize that God is the provider of these gifts. God did it and we are just the recipients. It also is a sense of freedom and humility that overcomes us when we realize how fortunate we are to be gifted by God.

I ache for people who live life with a dour disposition. The glass is always half empty. I am not worth anything. I have nothing to contribute. I am worthless. What a hard life to lead and to experience. Yet, the Gifts of the Spirit empower us with energy and joy and appreciation.

Peter Buehler, Presbyterian Pastor, tells the story of a gifted person in his congregation. The person was asked to reflect on why she was on the church's mission team. Why had she volunteered to teach Vacation Bible School in a particularly low-income community?

He goes on to say it was not the words Sarah used to say "why." Instead it was the joy in her face when she spoke, "I love getting to know the children's names. I look forward to seeing them each morning, to seeing their smiling faces." (Lectionary Homiletics, December 2003/January 2004, page 58.

It is a sense of satisfaction in our heart. It is a spiritual moment. A sense of joy of the blessings we receive as well as the blessing we are to others. We have a sense of new energy and delight.

Which brings me back to the conversation I had with my sister last week -- I emailed you on Monday and think there is something to it.

I was talking to Janis Sunday afternoon and she had been working on figuring out what gifts she had to offer (first off, I was delighted that she

actually listened to her brother!). It dawned on me that it may be the case for many of us.

One thought that came to mind is that we might go at this question in another fashion. Instead of trying to figure out what Gifts I have, what needs does the church have? What does the church do or could do in which I can contribute? It really is a way to be open to God's Spirit working in us and through us. Just the fact that you would spend some time contemplating how you might empower the ministries of this church is a first step. So be in prayer about what South Plains Presbyterian Church and you could do and how you could do it through the Gifts of the Spirit God gave you. For the focus of any gifts we have is the empowerment of the ministries of the body. And you could have a big part in that.

The passage says a couple more things.

The big declaration in this passage is about the variety of Gifts. It is about all the variety of Gifts the Spirit gives us: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers.

Paul declares different kinds of gifts, different kinds of service, different kinds of working as being a real variety pack of Gifts. Yet, it is the same Lord. The same Spirit. The same God. And that same Spirit provides these varieties of Gifts. Which are for the church.

So part of determining if the Gifts are authentic and instead of following a modern-day idol or personality are a couple of tests:

(1) Are the Gifts for the common good?

That is, are the Gifts being used to build up the church or to build up one's ego and status?

Where is the focus? Is the focus on the person or on a group? Or is the focus on empowering the work of the ministry? Do we participate in church in order to get a reward? Do we have to get "paid" for what we do for the church? Pay does not always mean financial. It could come in bragging rights or in kudos for what you have done or being the center of attention in a mission project. What kind of "payoff" are we expecting? Or are we satisfied with just doing God's work and letting the Spirit finish the job?

So, what is the 'common good' for you?

(2) The second test is about diversity.

In a congregation, one of the hallmarks of a strong congregation is a diversity of Gifts in the church.

Notice God did not give all the Gifts to one person! Notice God did not give the same Gifts to everyone in the same church. Notice that there is not an age differential in the Gifts...one does not "age out" of receiving and using Gifts.

Diversity is the buzz word in our society today. In the corporate world, in the educational arena, in the church world, diversity is the driving value in all three areas. There is the notion that diversity will lead to new insights, new strength, and more advancement.

That value of diversity has been part and parcel of the church for over 2000 years! That diversity of Gifts in the church has been a hallmark of building a community of faithful believers. That diversity enables us to see God's hand at work in marvelous ways. It has surprised us and shocked us, but it is God's Gift to us and to the church.

Sometimes, however, we do not embrace the diversity which God has provide for us. We get ourselves set and stuck in how we operate. We get on committees and never get off. We run certain programs year after year after year. We do the same programs over and over and over.

Because that is all we know how to do! Yet if we don't change up some and try different approaches, we never see all of the Gifts God has given to our congregation.

Out of a love for this congregation, one observation I have made in my brief stay. Too few of you are doing too much of the work. To few of you are on too many committees. Too few are doing the work and ministry of this congregation.

I say this because if the church is to grow, there needs to be space for people to get involved and use the Gifts they possess. It is a way to keep the Spirit alive and well. It is a way for all the diverse Gifts in the church to be displayed and used.

You have come through a long transition...and during a long transition, there is need for stability and solid grounding. Now, with new leadership arriving might be a time to take an assessment of your involvement and where God is calling you. Remember I said last week that you do not have a choice of being involved at South Plains Presbyterian Church. Everyone here is committed. But you do have a choice of where you are involved and how you show your commitment. Be in prayer about the diversity of Gifts in this congregation and how God can use them.

Gifts of the Spirit: there are lots of them! So, just use them!