

“Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith;” (Rom 12:6)

I hope I established for you in my last sermon that while we are one body, we are many members all placed here by God, and though we are many members, we are but one body, whose head is Christ. That fact should drive our view of one another and give us peace and patience toward one another. Today we will look at the other element Paul frequently couples with his discussion of the body – spiritual gifts.

I’ve seen this issue of gifts as a rather mysterious thing for a long time, primarily because of the diversity of opinions I’ve read on it. I don’t want to give the impression I believe my view is the ‘right’ one, precisely because of this diversity of viewpoints by people a lot smarter than me, but I also see that many expositors don’t take the whole context into account, and that makes it difficult to get clarity I think.

There are what I see as three prevailing schools of thought on this issue of spiritual gifts. This isn’t intended to give you all the variations of thought here, because many of them have rabbit trails that are exhausting in their depth and circuitousness. I’m trying to bundle many ideas together into a few broad strokes as a means of providing some help to our understanding.

First, some maintain that there are ‘special’ and ‘ordinary’ gifts of the Spirit, and that administrations and operations (1 Co 12:5-6) are the ‘ordinary’ gifts. They maintain that these ordinary gifts continue, while everything else Paul enumerates here in Chapter 12 and other passages are ‘extraordinary’ gifts that are applicable essentially to only the first century church. These gifts were provided primarily (though not exclusively) to His Apostles; their argument is that this limited duration of the ‘extraordinary’ gifts was specifically designed to be this way, not a matter of separation from the earthly ministry of Christ. This idea is based largely on Hebrews 2:4

“God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?”

This is used as a proof text that in the early days of the church, God aided the fast and broad growth of Christianity by placing these special powers upon the Apostles so that when they said they came in the name of God, they could ‘prove it’ to the masses. While I don’t argue with the plain fact God bore those men’s ministries witness through these things, that doesn’t mean there isn’t witness born to the truth of God’s ministers in every age, and it takes a liberty with the text that I don’t find there. The notion of ‘extraordinary’ and ‘ordinary’ gifts of the Spirit is a classification not found in the words. How can you argue that any gift of the Spirit is ‘ordinary’? I don’t think you can, and to me it cheapens the glorious nature of the Holy Spirit to call anything He does ‘ordinary’ and dismisses the idea that anything exceptional God’s people do is from Him, not of their own skill or righteousness.

The second line of reasoning is that these gifts are clearly no longer in play since they aren't visibly bestowed upon anyone anymore, and therefore this is a metaphorical admonition to anyone outside the church at Corinth in the first Century. They maintain that all these gifts were Apostolic, not bestowed upon so-called 'regular' people, and since there are no more Apostles, there can be no more gifts. Those who say this maintain that the Apostolic dispensation was highly specific in its worship, it had many peculiarities, and we should look to that period not as a model, but as something more pure and holy. Some maintain that if we were only better Christians, we might see these gifts return. There is a strong undercurrent of Apostle worship going through a lot of this talk, and not much Bible to support the notion in my view.

Third, and you see this largely in the modern-day Pentecostal or Charismatic movement, is the position that everyone has gifts and your display of them is a manifestation of your salvation or righteousness, if only you'll accept Christ and accept the gifts themselves. Everyone should talk in tongues, everyone should heal others, and you can if only you will believe on Jesus enough, yes, you can make it happen, and if you don't, it's because you're owned by the Devil. I don't think I need to say it, but to be clear this is a works righteousness argument in the extreme whose author is Satan. Nowhere does Paul or anyone make the argument that if you don't display these gifts you aren't saved.

These gifts are not the same as what expositors label 'saving grace'. Grace is absolutely a gift, but these gifts are not the same as that grace we are given to the saving of our souls, and they are not an automatic evidence of that saving grace. These gifts are also not the same as the fruit of the Spirit, just to be clear.

I haven't found any explanation of these gifts fully satisfying. I think mostly that they are too narrow and leave us nothing to really learn from these passages if there are not still gifts delivered to us by the Holy Spirit. Today's gifts may not be the same as what the Apostles were given and they may not always be obviously visible, but that doesn't mean that included in this diversity Paul discusses aren't other gifts appropriate and designed for each period a church finds itself in, given to the unique souls that make it up.

I think difficulty arises from how hard it is to believe that men could raise people from the dead, that they could heal with a touch or a thought, that they could cast out devils, etc., because we don't see that happening. We live in a time when these things are not happening around us, and in our 'pictures or it didn't happen' society, these acts are so fantastic that it is easy to dismiss them as metaphors or simply not a thing for us to learn from.

Though difficult to believe, we have evidence that these gifts were real, and they were exercised:

“But Peter put them all forth, and kneeled down, and prayed; and turning him to the body said, Tabitha, arise. And she opened her eyes: and when she saw Peter, she sat up.” (Act 9:40)

“And it came to pass, that the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and of a bloody flux: to whom Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him, and healed him.” (Act 28:8)

“And this did she many days. But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour.” (Act 16:18)

Should it trouble us that we don't perform these same feats of faith? Should we question our salvation because we aren't doing these same things? I don't think so. Paul tells us in this passage

“Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all.” (1Co 12:4-6)

There are a diversity of gifts, and Paul doesn't claim to enumerate them all, and some of them have broad definitions that could potentially manifest in different ways.

I am of the viewpoint that although the gifts that were abundant in the early days of the Christian church, and those that were most publicly evident in the Apostles are not all in evidence today, there are still gifts of the Spirit that are bestowed upon Christ's people to edify and glorify His Church. Paul tells us in His letter to the Ephesians that

“There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.” (Eph 4:4-8)

These are the same gifts we're talking about here, again, not the gift of saving grace. While this 'gave gifts unto men' doesn't mean all men have and will receive gifts of the Spirit, it also doesn't mean that it was only the Apostles who received them and no one ever will again.

The argument that there are no longer spiritual gifts to be had is made via a very narrow application of the end of 1 Corinthians 12. Where I focused my work on the message wrapped up in the metaphor of the body, others focus on the bookends of the

chapter, which I've quoted below. The focus on these bookends is a reasonable idea – it's how the chapter starts and ends after all. Looking at the text with this bookend view, it reads like this:

“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant. Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led. Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost. Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will...And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret? But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.” (1 Cor 12:1-11, 28-31)

If you treat the body metaphor like a parenthetical, the discourse on gifts flows together and could, arguably, stand on its own. The argument then goes a little like this. Paul calls out three things – gifts, administrations, and operations. Administrations and operations are still in existence – since we see churches still in existence, and there is diversity in how they specifically are put together and operate (though there is no diversity in ordinances or officers).

Further, Paul is focusing on these gifts because they were creating divisions and jealousies in the church; they were a new thing to behold with the entirety of the body being young in the faith and not knowing how to behave in their regard. He is specifically working to help them understand these wondrous things they are experiencing and see them in their proper light, not in the light of human reason and understanding. He is helping them to see these not as some ‘super-power’ so to speak, but as a gift given to a purpose:

“Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church.” (1Co 14:12)

He said something similar to the church at Ephesus:

“For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:” (Eph 4:12)

These gifts are not given for personal gain and elevation but for the edification of the church, and they must be used appropriately; all our gifts must be used appropriately and to that end. That must always be first in our minds and our thoughts when contemplating what the Lord has given us.

Paul lays out these gifts and as he closes out his discourse on the body, asks some rhetorical questions which enumerate additional specific gifts that were being experienced in those days. I think looking at the gifts enumerated might help us, but for the sake of time I'm only looking at those in 1Co 12.

- Word of wisdom – this is wisdom not in the general sense related to the world, but wisdom as it relates to the Word of God and how to behave in a Godly fashion, with a conversation that matches the standards of the Gospel

“But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.” (Jas 3:17)

- Word of knowledge – this is again not just worldly knowledge, this is a knowledge of Scripture primarily but also a supernatural knowledge of things relevant to the issues facing the body at any given time.
- Faith – I believe this is exceptional faith, perhaps a level of faith required to be sawn asunder or crucified without denying Christ. Think of the differences in Faithful vs Christian in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. It took an exceptional amount of faith to perform the way Faithful did at Vanity Fair. Faith is indeed a gift that should never be taken for granted, but I think we know from experience some individuals are gifted with more faith than others. The faith we operate under certainly has degrees of strength, and there is no reason to expect that the Holy Spirit doesn't imbue us with a supernatural faith from time to time when it is necessary.
- Apostles – those men who were called individually and specifically by Christ into His service, beheld him in the body after his resurrection, and were specifically and directly sent into the world by Christ to deliver His message. There have been no apostles since Paul that I know of, though Paul shows that there is nothing stopping Christ from calling more forward to His service.
- Prophets – this is, as it were, a term of art. This is not just general preaching, or the declaration of God's truth as He has preserved it for us in the Bible. To prophesy is to declare things to come that are unknown to others and that the speaker has no way of knowing without direct, divine revelation. Preaching the words of the Book does not make us prophets, to be clear. The Revelation of Jesus Christ is written down and available for all men to read. Relating that

message is not prophecy. There is no one alive today that has been touched with the gift of prophecy that I know of, and there haven't been any since the early days of the church, similarly to how there were no prophets alive in the earth in the so-called Inter-Testamental period. We know there will again be prophets, but there simply aren't any alive today I know of.

- Teachers – Paul distinguishes this as a spiritual gift, and I believe this refers specifically to the ability to instruct others in moral and religious matters. This is not the same as being an elder, though elders are generally thought of as teachers, and there is a teaching element in the administration of that office. Teaching takes time, patience, and knowledge. The ability to teach on spiritual matters I believe requires a heightened degree of these qualities as well as a deep humility and recognition in the teacher that they don't know everything. I don't mean a 'yuck yuck, I'm not so smart' toe in the dirt kind of thing. I mean a real, tangible sense that they are working in matters that without help from the Holy Ghost, the matter may not be knowable.

The inclusion of this as a spiritual gift begins to dissolve the argument that there are no more gifts, I think. I think there are lots of examples across many expositors that exemplify an ability to teach. Most explanations I've seen, though, stumble at this and seek to assign some ability to draw people to you as an indication of the gift. I believe there are most definitely teachers alive today, and this is likely one of the best words to describe what we do publicly.

- Workers of miracles – this would include raising people from the dead, causing the lame to walk, the blind to see, casting out devils, etc. No one has been able to do this since the days of the Apostles that I am aware of, despite all the silly stories the Catholics would like us all to believe and all the waffles, tortillas and double shot extra foam vanilla lattes with the face of Mary in them. There have been no people bestowed with this gift since the early days of the church that are credibly documented in my estimation.
- Gifts of healing – this is the gift bestowed upon at least several, if not all of the apostles, and others such as Philip, to heal with a touch. Examples are given throughout Acts of many people being healed at the prayer and touch of these individuals. This, despite the forehead thwacking theater of so-called "healing christianity" in this country, does not seem to be bestowed upon anyone at this time.
- Speaking with tongues and interpreting – I combine these two together because Paul also does (*"If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret."* 1Co 14:27). This speaking in tongues is one of the most abused displays of gifts there is, I think. The Pentecostal movement claims that this is a necessary manifestation of the Holy Spirit, and if you don't speak in tongues you aren't saved. This of course, is balderdash.

Speaking in tongues was demonstrated several times in the Acts, with the first

time being at the day of Pentecost

“And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? (Act 2:7-8)

They were speaking in languages not known to the speakers, but to the listeners they were most certainly known. At no time was it ever some person thrashing about and making a bunch of guttural, goofy sounds that made no sense to anyone, even the person making the sounds. This is why Paul instructs that when you speak in an unknown tongue – whether that’s a language known to men but not your audience, or some language unknown to men – you have someone who can interpret what you’re saying. The Holy Ghost doesn’t give you words to say for no reason, and there is no purpose served in you flailing around making weird noises and calling that ‘tongue-speech’.

All gifts of the Spirit are extraordinary and endowed on individuals to serve the purpose of God, whether in a moment or over a long period of time. They are not merited, they do not come because anyone deserves them or because they are necessary to anything other than God’s purpose. Could the church in the first century spread without them? Absolutely. God can make His word spread in any fashion He chooses. We have the evidence He chose to use this method to make people understand the people endowed with the gifts were His servants. That doesn’t mean these manifestations of gifts are the only manifestations.

When considering the gifts of the Spirit, I want you to consider that these aren’t spoken about by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians in an isolated chapter. Context isn’t about just 4 or 5 verses. Paul didn’t write this letter with these chapter breaks in it. Consider the context of chapters 12, 13 and 14 as a whole and look at the entirety of what he is saying. I think the point Paul is making in these three chapters is summed up well here:

“And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.” (1Co 13:2)

He makes a very strong point – you can have so much faith you’re able to remove a mountain or a prophetic ability unlike any other, but if you don’t have charity, especially as it relates to other members of the body, those gifts are essentially meaningless. The church at Corinth was struggling with many things, including this issue of how to treat each other and those around them. The struggle was manifesting itself in how they looked at each dispensation of a gift, and how they then allowed that to run their public worship services. To be clear, I don’t believe that this struggle is unique to the church at Corinth or to only the opening age of the Church. These matters of charity

apply to all God's people in every age, even in ours.

While we may not prophesy or speak in tongues or heal with a touch, these words are preserved for us by the Holy Ghost to instruct and edify us, therefore they have some application to us.

I believe that the application is this – we have a responsibility to a baseline behavior, i.e., charity in all its facets. That's a baseline that wars against our nature and always requires the mortifying of our members. There are a multitude of elements to that mortification and the living in a charitable way, but none of those elements includes lording gifts or abilities over each other or trying to force everyone to be a certain way.

“But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.” (1Co 12:31)

Expositors differ on what Paul means in the first clause. He certainly isn't promoting the sin of covetousness. Some think he's chiding the people at Corinth for being so focused on who has what gift and everyone exhibiting those gifts as a part of the regular church service. Some think it is better translated as a question, as if he is following up his rhetorical questions – are all apostles, prophets, healers, etc. – with another question. Something like this “you know not everyone has the same gifts, but you're going to sit around and pine for what you think are the best ones? I'm showing you a better way to spend your time and energies”.

That way is to see each person in the body as a member of it, unique in their skills, their spiritual gifts, their reason for God placing them here, and to treat them all with great charity. Charity is **clearly** the better way Paul is talking about here – there's no break between chapter 12 and chapter 13! Then when he closes chapter 14 with

“Let all things be done decently and in order.”

He is driving home the practical point to them that they are NOT doing things in a decent and orderly fashion with all this focus on who has what gift and how uncharitable they are when they wrangle around in the public worship service over who will prophesy or speak in tongues or sing his own psalm, etc. All this behavior was the opposite of charity in a multitude of ways.

I'm not intending to get into another discourse on charity, we have sermons that speak to some of those issues specifically. I want you to see that a key piece of that charity is recognition that not a single one of us has the corner on understanding who the most important person here is. I want you to see and acknowledge, that neither you nor your gifts are more critical to the ministry than any others and trying to force others to be more like you because your gifts are so spectacular is not the way. An eye can't make a foot into another eye. A heart can't make a finger into another leg. We have a

diversity of gifts in this place, and I don't believe any of them are actually the 'best'; I don't think that's what Paul means here with his use of the word 'best'. He is calling out the belief that some gifts are better than others and that they are elevating them in a way that is unnecessary, and perhaps even improper. I believe that when Paul enumerates 'first apostles, secondarily, prophets' he is not encouraging them to rank these gifts and be envious for them, he is simply stating a fact – the Apostles had a greater degree of these gifts than others, because they had all of them. Prophecy is second because it is most edifying to the church, etc. That should not drive a coveting behavior, because **we cannot obtain these gifts**, as we see in the account of Simon in Acts 8.

The gifts we have are the ones given to us by our head, Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, and they have been given toward one purpose – edifying the church! They are not given for personal advantage or elevation or ranking the membership in order of importance. Again, all parts of the body are assembled by and under our Head, Jesus Christ. We must be content with that structure, patient and charitable with one another, and grateful for the construct He has built here. We must exhort one another to charity and spiritual thinking, and refrain from trying to mold people into being something they are not or into all being the same. We are diverse according to God's purposes.

That doesn't mean any one of us should promote our difference or create some sort of wall around ourselves that keeps us from being a lively stone fitted perfectly into place. Remember, that's the goal – compactedness and fit. You don't get to walk around in your pride and self-satisfaction about how you're a unique flower in the bouquet. No, that isn't what we're talking about here. We still have to call out sin and exhort one another. Remember that baseline we must work toward – charity. Charity is selfless first and foremost. It puts the standards of our King ahead of our personal desires, our pride, etc.

When Paul speaks to the church at Rome regarding gifts, I think he drives this very point home, that the body should be united with diverse gifts amongst its members, and each member ought to look to the use of their gift with sobriety and focus:

“For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching; Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.” (Rom 12:3-8)

This clarifies for me that there isn't some limited list of gifts – see here in Romans that mercy is listed as a gift, but it is not in 1 Corinthians – I say there is not some limiting list, but a true diversity, chosen and given based on the needs of a particular body, and certainly not on individual merit. That lack of merit should humble us and help us to see that we must be appreciative of each member of the body and the gifts they have received. We should not focus on those gifts not present, for if we are meant to edify the church and Christ our Lord through a healing touch, for example, He will bestow that gift upon us so that it edifies His body.

I must confess that on at least one question I feel unclear, but I want to address it as best I can. That is, *do all members of the body receive gifts of the Spirit?*

I believe, given the gifts that are enumerated, they come and go as need dictates. Some may be more prevalent than others and seemingly always present. Certainly, Apostles didn't stop being Apostles when they went home at night. But healing, or prophecy I believe comes and goes – again, as it fulfills God's need and edifies His church. That extra measure of faith required to endure extreme trial or affliction may not always be present, for example, but it comes in time of need from the Holy Spirit. I don't think we can from scripture lay a definitive claim that there are any of God's people that don't receive some gift of the Spirit at least from time to time, but there isn't anything that definitely says all do, either. Two passages might help

“But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.” (1 Cor 12:11)

“As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.” (1Pe 4:10-11)

The verses lead me to believe these are not universal, not merited, but available to all as the Holy Ghost sees fit.

Further, while I don't know that Owen hits the full mark, I think he hits it here when he says:

“Were there no more but One Gift, or Gifts of one sort, the whole Body would be but one Member: As where there is none, there is no animated Body but a dead carcass.”

To me this is a difficult thing to comprehend, so I don't know if I made it any better for you, but I hope and pray to our Lord I didn't make it worse.