

***Living an Incredible Life***  
God's Incredible Gift: Gifts of the Spirit  
1 Corinthians 12:4-27  
April 20, 2008

Clip from "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe."

Young Lucy was given a powerful spiritual gift. Like Lucy, as we begin to understand and use our spiritual gifts and as we accept other's gifts, the church becomes strong and the people in the church become more secure in Christ. Where do the gifts of the Spirit come from? What difference do they make in our lives?

Verse 1 begins with the word spiritual = translated as pneumatikos. The word occurs 15 times in 1 Corinthians. Apparently, the church in Corinth, just like us, got confused about what it meant to be truly "spiritual." We can *feel* very spiritual, and we can *appear* to be acting spiritual, but our hearts could be full of our own ego and agendas. So we might say, "I just want the best for my church" or "I'm just speaking the truth," but in our impatience or unloving attitudes we may be very un-Spirit-like.

So, first of all, we have to back up and start with the Holy Spirit in our lives. The startling good news of the New Testament is this: everyone who accepts Christ is gifted by the Holy Spirit! In the ancient world it was universally accepted that a select group of people – the powerful, the beautiful, or the intellectual – were especially gifted and in touch with the fire of the Divine. But Jesus changed all of that. He opened the door for everyone – men and women, young and old, rich and poor, intellectuals and non-intellectuals, down and out and up and out – to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and to live incredibly gifted lives.

We can't even begin the Christian life without a supernatural breakthrough of the Holy Spirit in our lives (see verses 1-3 and see Romans 8:9, 14). That, my friends, is normal, daily Christian living. It starts when we say, "God, fill me with the power of your Holy Spirit." And then our life with Jesus doesn't continue by trying hard on our own to perfect our lives. Nor does it continue by dramatic, thrilling, shocking, hair-raising encounters with the Holy Spirit. It continues as we do life, our life, our ordinary, everyday lives, but now we're trusting – moment-by-moment – the power of the Holy Spirit. And how do you know if the Spirit is really working in you? The real test is what happens in your character. Are you changing? Are you becoming more like Jesus in your everyday life? Here's the list that Paul called the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The bottom line is this: do my gifts and the use of my gifts and my opinions about the gifts of other people lead to love or not?

That's why Paul begins this section by giving his objective in verse 1: "Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed." As I've studied this

passage, I see three things that Paul wants us to know and experience and practice about spiritual gifts: (1) God is the Incredible Giver; (2) You are Incredibly Gifted; (3) Others are Incredibly Gifted – by the same Spirit as you are but in different ways. This will lead to three incredibly positive and life-changing affirmations.

**#1 - God is the Incredible Giver.** Notice how this discussion always leads back to the One Giver of the Spiritual gifts (see the circled words on your insert: Verse 4 says "... but the same Spirit." Verse 5 says, "...but the same Lord." Verse 6 says, "...but the same God." (By the way, people sometimes wonder where you find the concept of the Trinity – that God is three-in-one and one-in-three – in the Bible. If you keep your mind and eyes open, you'll find the Trinity all over the Bible - like right here, for instance). Notice the rest of the passage: verse 7 - "of the Spirit"; verse 8 - "through the Spirit"; verse 9 - "by the same Spirit" and "by that one Spirit: verse 11 - "All these are the work of one and the same Spirit"; verse 13 - "by the one Spirit."

I think you get the point: God the Holy Spirit is the Source of every spiritual gift. We don't create them by our own effort. By our laziness, or our fear, or our cowardice, or our bitterness and resentment, we can choose to place them on the shelf. But they are always gifts. Every gift is a manifestation of the glory and goodness of God.

But notice something else about God: not only is God good and God has a good heart towards us, God is also sovereign. What does that mean? The sovereignty of God means that God chooses or elects us to be His children and then God also chooses how he will gift and bless our lives. Notice the phrases in the boxes: verse 11 - "just as he determines"; verse 18 - "God has arranged the parts of the body"; "as he wanted them to be"; verse 28 - "God has appointed." On the one hand, God did not take a survey and ask us, "Hey, just wanted to check in with you and see how many and what kind of spiritual gifts you'd like to have." Nor does it mean that God plays dice with his children. There's nothing random about God's sovereign will in your life. God has designed you, equipped you, gifted you and placed you exactly where he wants you to be.

God is like the master coach or the master conductor or the master director. In terms of a soccer team, God chooses your gifts and the position you will play. I suppose you can request to play midfield, but ultimately, God may place you in goal or he may put you back as a defender. In terms of the great drama of redemption, God decides your role – just as he determines, as he wanted them to be.

Do you believe that? Do you really believe that God is good? Do you believe that God really does want to show his goodness by giving you good gifts? When you look into the face of Jesus, the One who was and is God in the flesh for us, we find an unbelievably good God. This leads to the first affirmation: ***"I can trust that my Heavenly Father has designed, gifted and placed me exactly where he wants me to be in His family."*** Have you come to the place where you can rest in that? And I do mean rest.

**#2 - You are Incredibly Gifted** - Does that strike you as arrogant and pompous? It shouldn't – especially if you understand that these are truly spiritual gifts. You didn't

earn them; you can't buy them; you don't achieve them. They aren't like a raise or a bonus or an award for being good or moral or righteous. They are a free gift. God likes giving gifts. As a matter of fact, Christians keep saying that our new life in Christ begins with a gift: it's called the gift of salvation. We come to God through faith in Jesus Christ and He gives us the free gift of a new life in Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9). But God has also given us spiritual gifts.

What do we mean by spiritual gifts? What are they? They aren't necessarily talents, like some people are good at painting or some people are fast runners. From this passage we get a few clues about spiritual gifts. First, they are supernatural gifts. That is, when you use them, when you are operating in your area of spiritual giftedness and the Holy Spirit flows through your life in a way that is way beyond your own strength. Do you remember Lucy in the film clip? She had the gift of healing or perhaps the gift of mercy, which means the healing of broken hearts. When she took her gift out and used it, people were drawn into a deeper experience of Aslan or Jesus. That's what happens when we use our gifts.

This past week I talked to a woman in our church family about her spiritual gifts. She has the gift of hospitality, which means that she loves to bring people together – often in her home – so they experience the love of Christ in a very concrete way. When she expresses hospitality, when she opens her home, she creates instant community for people. It's really amazing – and she loves doing it.

Secondly, spiritual gifts are diverse. There are four lists of spiritual gifts found in the New Testament and none of the lists are the same. The gifts listed in this passage include: the message of wisdom, the message of knowledge, the gift of faith, gifts of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits and tongues. Other lists add the following spiritual gifts: serving, teaching, encouraging, generosity, leadership, showing mercy, evangelism and some people would include craftsmanship and administration.

The New Testament authors did not write one, final, comprehensive list of spiritual gifts. What does that tell you? It suggests to me the radical freedom of the Holy Spirit to distribute gifts according to his plan for the good of the body. It suggests to me that we should be very cautious about locking the Holy Spirit into a box: i.e. "Sorry, Holy Spirit, but we don't need that gift. Sorry, Holy Spirit, but we don't want you working that way." We have to stay open, prayerful, receptive, fluid, and alive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Third, the gifts of the Spirit are for a specific purpose: notice verse 7 – "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." God arranges and dispenses the gifts not just for my benefit, but for our benefit. For the common good. My gifts are not really my gifts; they are your gifts. So the goal is that all of our gifts will mesh together in a beautiful communal dance to bring glory to God. You don't have all the gifts and I don't have all the gifts. As a matter of fact, pastors usually don't have more gifts than you do. Churches grow strong by allowing pastors to operate in their

areas of giftedness and then pastors allow others to operate in their areas of giftedness. That's why we need all the gifts working together.

Some people assume that their gifts are inferior to others. "Gosh, I just got the measly gift of serving others or showing mercy. Those are such quiet, behind-the-scenes gifts compared to teaching or tongues. I want a big, loud, flashy, splashy gift." Paul addresses that sense of inferiority head on in verse 15-17. That's why we need each other and we need to balance our gifts with all the other gifts we see in the church.

Knowing that you are gifted leads to the second affirmation: ***"I can renounce the sin of self-rejection and I can accept myself, rejoicing in the Spirit's gifts in me."***

**#3 – Others are Incredibly Gifted.** The church in Corinth had an ongoing problem with a particular sin: it was the sin of elitism. Elitism means that I or we think that we are a notch above others due to certain factors such as race, gender, education, social class, and upbringing, etc. They expressed their elitism in the spiritual realm – i.e. "We are better than you because we are more spiritual than you." We are the spiritually-in group; you are not as in as we are. In chapter 1 we discover that they were splitting into groups based on who they followed. "I follow Paul," some said, while others said, "I follow Apollos" or "I follow Cephas." Paul blasted them: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?" Do you see what was happening here? They were so "spiritual" that they used their extra-spiritual-ness as a club to beat up on others.

We do the same thing today. We find some author or speaker or Christian leader that seems to say things in a way that makes sense, and we then latch on to him or her. And then we look down on other Christians who haven't been enlightened like we are. If only they could find the freedom that we've found in Rick Warren or Tim Keller or Homer Simpson or Matt Woodley. Could I offer a "radical" suggestion: let's agree to get really excited about following Jesus!

Or we look down on others because they don't have the same gifts that we do. We have gift-snobbery. But what if others are gifted but they just have different gifts than us? That's the point Paul makes over and over again is this. Look again at verses 4, 5, 6 verse 11. We tend to see the world through our eyes. So if we have the gift of mercy, we will say, "Do you see all those hungry, hurting, broken people. Who will meet their needs?" And we'll get impatient with others who seem cold and uncompassionate. But then if we have the gift of leadership we might say, "Yes, there are lots of people but someone needs to get this ministry organized and structured and financially sound and then we need to lead these broken people into Christ and healthy relationships." Do you see how the diverse gifts need each other?

As matter of fact, the very people that seem the weirdest or the weakest or the least desirable are actually the people we need the most in our community. That's how Paul describes it in verses 22. In my last church there was Alan, a plump little man with Down syndrome. He'd show up every Sunday, sing loud and off-key, snooze during the sermon and delicately place a one dollar bill in the offertory plate. I loved Alan! I

discovered that Alan didn't just need us; we needed him. He taught us so much about dedication and acceptance and joy in Christ. Alan led me closer to Jesus.

That's why we need those people who seem to be slow or disruptive or broken or hurting. We need unborn babies and the disabled and the traumatized and the depressed and the poor. We need the Alan's of this world to join us and lead us. This isn't being condescending at all. I mean, we *really* need them. They are our teachers. They evangelize us, in the sense that they preach the good news of Jesus to us.

That leads to the third affirmation about spiritual gifts and life in the Holy Spirit: "***I can renounce the sin of elitism and I can accept the diverse gifts in others.***"

**Conclusion:** So how do we find our spiritual gifts? Here's my advice: take the long route. In other words, spend five to twenty years serving people in the church. Start doing things. Do something – anything. Don't sit on the sidelines. Don't just complain that others aren't doing their part. Start serving and see what happens. Start showing mercy and see how the Holy Spirit uses it. Start praying for people and see if they get healed. Start leading something and see if others follow you. Plug in somewhere and use your gifts.