

Pastor Jim Lloyd

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Title: Spiritual Gifts – Unopened and Misused

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:1

Today we'll look at the first verse of 1 Corinthians chapter 12. *"Now about spiritual gifts [now about spiritualities], brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant."* There are two kinds of ignorance that exist regarding spiritual gifts. One sort of ignorance is the ignorance that DOES NOT OPEN THE GIFTS which the Lord is giving to His church. The other kind of ignorance concerns the MISUSE OF THE GIFTS which have been opened. It's obvious in Paul's writing to the Corinthians that he does NOT need to correct the first type of ignorance. The Corinthians had opened all their gifts and had thrown away the wrappings. Here in 1 Corinthians Paul needs to correct the MISUSE of the gifts. But, since in our day there is considerable ignorance of the gifts of the Spirit, because for many the gifts have not been opened, I thought we might do well to spend a few moments here. There are some who believe that spiritual gifts may not be opened. Why do they hold this position? Many in the body of Christ today believe that the gifts WERE NOT GIVEN FOR TODAY. Those who share that viewpoint have a number of reasons for believing such. I'd like to respond to their viewpoint, not in an argumentative way. Sometimes we can get trapped into believing something that really is not true. If we can just have a moment of opening the door and being liberated from that viewpoint, we can then enter into what God has for us.

- 1. UNOPENED GIFTS. Views that the gifts are not for today: A. The Lord withdrew these manifestations of His Holy Spirit at the close of the Apostolic Age – the time period of the 12 apostles.** Therefore, when you look at gifts of healings and miracles and faith and tongues and interpretation of tongues and prophecy, it is understood by those who advocate this position, that the Lord, at the end of the apostolic age, withdrew them. That He intended them only to last as long as the apostles lasted, to get the church going. The verse that is often used to support this is 1 Corinthians 13:8 – *"Where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled [or, they shall pass away]."* Those who use that verse to support their viewpoint, don't go on to read the rest of the passage. It also says that knowledge shall pass away along with tongues and prophecy. I can't think that there is anyone in the body of Christ today who is willing to concede that, with the end of the apostolic age, knowledge died. Paul is not talking at all here about the difference between the apostolic age and the age which follows in church history. Rather, he is talking about the difference between the present age and the age which is to come WHEN JESUS RETURNS. He's saying that when Jesus returns, THEN the gift of prophecy, the gift of tongues, and the gift of knowledge will no longer be needed. They will be swallowed up by the revelation of Jesus Christ Himself – *"when the perfect will come"* (1 Corinthians 13:10). *"But in the meantime, we see through a glass, darkly"* (13:12). Paul himself said at the beginning of this letter to the Corinthians, *"Therefore, you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed"* (1:7). That's a great statement for the church. The church is not to lack any spiritual gift until the Lord Jesus Christ is revealed. That's how long the gifts are to last! **B. History proves that the gifts ceased with the apostolic age.** To an extent, gifts DID DIMINISH in operation. But, there were those who kept alive the gifts in various places, at various times, with various people. John Wesley, commenting on the phenomenon that the gifts seemed to have diminished after the apostolic age, said this (I quote) - *"Because of the love of money, almost all of Christians was waxed cold. This was the real cause why the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Ghost were no longer found in the Christian church."* That is Wesley's view. Dr. H. A. Ironside, who was the non-charismatic, non-Pentecostal pastor of Moody Bible Church in Chicago, ministering in the earlier part of this century, when a great many of his friends and colleagues in the ministry were against the charismatic renewal, had this to say about the gifts dying off after the apostolic age – *"Some insist that some of the gifts have absolutely disappeared. But I do not know of any Scripture that tells us that. I do not know of any Scripture that says the age of miracles has passed. I would not dare say that the sign gifts all ended with Paul's imprisonment. I know from early church history that this is not true. These Corinthians came behind in no gift, we are told. And it seems to me, in the Book of Acts, that as time went on and as the church began to drift a little and as dissension and other things came in that grieved the Lord, there was more reservation of His part in bestowing the gifts. That I believe explains the lack of many of these gifts today. The church has gotten so far away and there is so much strife, division, worldliness and carnality, that He no longer delights to lavish His gifts upon her as He did at the beginning."* That's Ironside's view. **C. The New Testament Canon, the twenty-seven books, is now completed.** This view says, *"The Early Church didn't have the written Word, therefore, they needed to go with spiritual gifts; such as prophecy and the like. They hold that when the*

Bible came in written form, the New Testament, the NEED FOR THE GIFTS NO LONGER EXISTED.” Such a viewpoint is tremendously unaware of what was going on in the New Testament church regarding gifts. The utterances in the Early Church, the prophetic utterances and the utterances of tongues with interpretation, were not on the level of the authority of Scripture. In fact, they were subject to the judgment of others in the congregation. Aren’t we told to test the spirits, to see whether or not they are from God. We’re NOT told to test the Scripture, to see whether or not it’s from God. No admonition ever given will say, “Test the Scripture, to see whether or not it’s from God,” but the spoken gifts were always to be tested. And, they were under the control of the persons giving them. When the Early Church faced a problem that needed an authoritative answer, they didn’t go to their prophets. They went to the Old Testament Scriptures, the Scriptures they had. For example, in Acts 15, we’re told that the Early Church was debating the issue of whether or not to admit Gentiles without having them circumcised and become Jews in practice first. They did not, on that occasion say, “Let’s see what the prophets have to say about this.” No, they finally came to the point where they asked, “What do the Scriptures say?” James, the leader of that group, quoted the Scripture. The OLD TESTAMENT was their authority! NOT a spiritual gift! So the idea that “the New Testament is now completed, we don’t need spiritual gifts” is a mistaken position. It assumes that the spiritual gifts were filling a vacuum before the New Testament came. They weren’t that at all. The Early Church HAD the clear teaching of the apostles, the Word of Christ. Spiritual gifts were an augment to that preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ and how He went about doing good. **D. Spiritual Gifts aren’t needed any longer.** I see it differently than that. I hold that if ever the gifts were needed, it would be today. If ever people are broken and hurting and in need of the liberating power of Jesus Christ through the presence of the Holy Spirit, it is today. There is a measure of truth to the fact that a culture that has experienced miracles, if they continue to harden themselves against the witness of Jesus Christ, God may withdraw the working of miracles. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man died and went to Hell. In Hell he lifted up his eyes to Abraham and asked Abraham to send Lazarus or someone back to witness to his five brothers. Abraham said, “*If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead*” (Luke 16:31). I would concur that God may not, on SOME occasions, work miracles because His written Word is already sufficient within that body of people. **E. If the gifts are for today, why do many Christians not manifest them?** In many cases, I would put the blame on a lack of spirituality and aliveness toward God. There is a LACK OF FAITH to believe that the gifts may be appropriated and used by the church of Jesus Christ TODAY. Sometimes, the gifts have not been opened because persons have believed that these gifts are simply a manifestation of NATURAL TALENTS. People who are teachers, therefore, should have knowledge. Knowledge being understood as an exercise of the ability to get into Scripture and understand it. Or wisdom. Or that people who are more OPTIMISTIC just naturally demonstrate the gift of faith. But such a view is to again misunderstand the functioning of the gifts. Again – there are supernatural impartations of God’s grace which are given to His body at specific times. They are NOT natural! In other words, one doesn’t work himself into having one of the gifts. One’s natural abilities and talents may correspond or complement the supernatural gift, but they are given from the Lord and they are supernatural in their working.

- 2. MISUSED GIFTS.** There are two extremes to the charismatic renewal. One is “charisphobia.” The other is “charismania.” “Charisphobia” is the fear of the gifts. “Charismania” is to be so caught up in the gifts that one ceases to have balance and to keep Jesus Christ as front and center. Paul writes, not to correct the charisphobia side of the church, but to correct the charismania of the church. He indicates that the Corinthian church is ignorant about spiritual gifts. How could a church that was so rich in the expression of every spiritual gift be ignorant of them? I’m sure this must have been a question that Paul’s listeners had when this letter was read to them. How dare he accuse us of being ignorant when we have ALL the gifts functioning? How could WE be ignorant of them? **This is the way Paul corrects them: A.** He says that ONE of the ways that you are unaware of is that you, in the body, are **considering the gifts as COMPETITIVE rather than COMPLEMENTARY.** Especially for the Corinthians, tongues seem to be the gift which expressed spirituality. The utterance of tongues in public worship services seemed to be a mark of spirituality and if you did not have that gift, functioning in the public worship service, you may be regarded as on a sublevel of the gifts at Corinth. People were evidently comparing themselves. This party spirit had worked itself into the expression of the gifts, competing gifts – “I have THIS gift, you DON’T have this gift, therefore, I must be more favored of the Lord, more spiritual.” This is not the case! Not all the gifts are given to just one person - neither the nine gifts here or the gifts in Ephesians or Romans 12 (there’s anywhere from 19 to 24 spiritual gifts, depending on who counts them and which ones you count). Evidence in Scripture seems to indicate that all of the gifts were expressed in Christ’s life, with the exception of tongues and interpretation. But

who knows if in His own private prayer life, He may have used those. No ONE person can fully express the person of Jesus Christ. All of us together express that. So the gifts are distributed in the body. No ONE person has them all. Each has something. The gifts are to be complementary rather than competitive. Because they're complementary, we can be at home with our gifts. While earnestly desiring the better gifts and earnestly desiring to employ the gifts, and at the same time, not coveting what someone else has and feeling like we're left out if we don't have that particular gift. **STORY:** Chuck Swindoll tells a story about a group of animals who decided to improve their general welfare by starting a school. Apparently some animals were coveting the abilities of other animals. So the curriculum included swimming, running, climbing and flying. The DUCK, an excellent SWIMMER, was deficient in other areas, so he majored in climbing, running and flying, much to the detriment of his swimming. The RABBIT, a superior RUNNER, was forced to spend so much time in other classes, that he soon lost much of his famed speed. The SQUIRREL, who had rated A as a CLIMBER, dropped to a C, because his instructors spent too much time teaching him to swim and fly. The EAGLE was disciplined for SOARING to the treetop when he had been told to learn how to climb, even though flying was most natural to him. We are to use our gifts to complement one another, NOT to replace one another. We are NEVER to operate the gifts in a spirit of COMPETITION.

B. Not CONSIDERING LOVE ESSENTIAL to insure the proper use of the gifts. 1 Corinthians 13 is sandwiched between the two chapters on the gifts, because LOVE should be front and center. Where GIFTS are front and center and they become spiritual showcases – “Look at us, at how spiritual we are” – then they're not undergirded by love and they lose their power and their effectiveness. NO gift is effective, unless it is undergirded by the power of love. NO spiritual renewal or revival or work of the Spirit is enduring, unless it is undergirded by love. Satan would LOVE to take a work of the Spirit, which results in the renewal and revival of God's people, and cause them to become proud and say, “We are THE CHURCH. We are the people that have experienced the mighty revival from God. What is wrong with you?” So that spirituality becomes something to boast about. Have you ever walked into a church and had a first impression, after being there maybe one service, and said to yourself, “This is not a spiritual church.”? That may be a valid judgment. On the other hand, it may be coming from the standpoint of spiritual pride. Basically, it's saying, “In one short moment, I've got this place all summed up.” That's the kind of thing the Corinthians felt at home doing. Making snap judgments which were not undergirded by love. Where there is NOT love, the gifts sound like brass and a tinkling cymbal – it's just noise – a waste of time and effort – as Paul tells the Corinthians.

C. Not REGULATING the gifts through PROPER ORDER. In Corinth, there was a general state of confusion in the worship services. Several people were getting up and sharing all at one time, so many couldn't hear or understand what was being said. A lot of people were doing their thing, getting blessed. Very few were being edified. It's one thing to be BLESSED. It's quite another thing to be EDIFIED. Paul says, “You've got to regulate these things. The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. You need to take turns. You need to put a limit on the expression of the vocal gifts – prophecy and tongues. *“Two or no more than three in the service”* (14:27). Too much is TOO MUCH! People become inundated. The sacred will become commonplace through its overuse. It will become MISUSED. That is why sometimes after a gift is expressed, a word of information or instruction is given. There is often someone who has not been in a service where a vocal gift of the Spirit has been exercised before. It's really important to help them understand and appreciate and enter into what the Spirit of God is doing.

D. Not EVALUATING the APPROPRIATENESS of the exercise of the gifts. For example, they were placing uninterpreted utterances of tongues on a very high level. Paul said, “That is of no worth to the congregation. Don't have uninterpreted utterances of tongues in your services. If you are going to give an utterance of tongues in a public service, it should ALWAYS be interpreted.” If you don't know that there is someone to interpret, don't share the message in tongues. If you share a message in tongues AND NO ONE INTERPRETS, THEN YOU ask for the interpretation. And, even at that, Paul seems to be saying, prophecy is the superior form of gift. In other words, tongues with interpretation edifies the church body. Prophecy edifies the church body. Tongues WITHOUT interpretation DOES NOT edify the church body. My understanding of what Paul says is that if you were going to give a message in tongues AND you were going to interpret, he would direct you to just give a prophetic word. But Paul says very clearly, “DON'T FORBID to speak in tongues. Don't despise it. Don't forbid prophesying. Evaluate the appropriateness.” Does it edify? Let me add that functioning in the gifts is a learning process. We need to make room for learning to operate in the gifts. Let's not quench the spirit of someone who's just beginning to exercise a gift by saying, “That wasn't perfect.” Allow room for growth. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there's got to be liberty. I want to encourage you to express gifts in the Lord. I also want to say that the Scriptures give us the vehicle to talk about the appropriateness of the gift.

E. Using the GIFTS as a BAROMETER OF SPIRITUALITY. That's where the Corinthians made their mistake. “Brother or Sister so and so

has this gift – they must be spiritual.” It’s true that a person who desires a gift and is exercising the gift may really indeed be walking in the Lord. I hope so. But not always. The true indication of spirituality is NOT the expression of a gift. The true indication of spirituality is the EXPRESSION OF THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT. I don’t think I know anyone who has all the gifts. You may or may not know what your gifts are. I encourage you, if you don’t know what they are, to begin prayerfully waiting before the Lord and say, “Lord, what gift have You given me that I haven’t opened yet?” SEEK EARNESTLY THE BEST GIFT! I don’t think you need to fret over it. The Word says – “He gives severally as HE wills.” Just make sure if the Holy Spirit is prompting you, do your best to respond appropriately. I can look at these gifts and can identify a couple that I have exercised. But when I look at the fruit of the Spirit, I find that the FRUIT of the Spirit is in the SINGULAR. Whereas, the GIFTS are in the plural. No one person has ALL the gifts. But every believer is to have ALL the fruit, because it is singular. Don’t expect me to go through the list in Galatians and say, “There’s love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Which one do I want to ask God for?” You don’t do that with fruit! The Spirit of Jesus Christ is a complete personality that wants to come into your life completely with ALL His fruit. The Scriptures say, “By their FRUIT you shall know them” (Matthew 7:16). NOT by their gifts. Don’t get in that trap of judging by gifts as to whether or not a person belongs to Christ. Jesus said in Matthew 7:22-23, “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in Your name? Didn’t we drive out demons in Your name?’ and He’ll say, ‘I never knew you.’” How can that happen? Could it be they have the gifts WITHOUT the fruit? And they were not of Christ? Satan can counterfeit and imitate spiritual gifts. We can, too. But Satan and we, on the natural level, are baffled to imitate the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit cannot be imitated. It is unique. It is a manifestation of the character of Christ. Paul does a beautiful thing in talking about the gifts in another passage, Ephesians 4:8. Talking about the foundation of the gifts, he quotes an Old Testament Psalm about the enthronement of God, the coronation of God as King. Psalm 68:18, “When He ascended on high, He led captives in His train and received gifts from men.” Get the picture for a moment. You’re in a coronation hall. God is enthroned. There are captives, the people He has liberated to follow Him. When He sits down, the captives GIVE HIM GIFTS. That sounds logical, doesn’t it? When someone has a coronation, you would expect the lesser – the vassals – would give the greater – the King – gifts. Paul quotes from Psalm 68:18 and Ephesians 4:8, and he does a marvelous thing. He quotes two lines out of the Old Testament and then he changes a line and completely inverts its meaning. He says, “When Christ ascended on high, He led captives in His train and gave gifts to men.” See the change – instead of RECEIVING gifts, He GAVE gifts. What is the first thing Christ does when He ascends? He GIVES the Holy Spirit. He has every right to demand that we give Him everything. But in that moment, He is giving and HE’S STILL GIVING! When He ascended on high, He led captives in His train – that is, the people whom He liberated are following Him. Then He turns around and He gives gifts. What gifts does He give to the church? The very gifts we’ll be talking about, as well as the gifts in Ephesians 4 and Romans 12. Paul spells it out – Jesus wants His supernatural ministry to continue in the world. The only way that supernatural ministry can continue is THROUGH HIS PEOPLE. “Greater works,” Jesus said, “shall you do than I” (John 14:12). Not greater in terms of “kind.” I don’t think you can do anything greater than raising a person from the dead or raising from death yourself. But greater in terms of extent. More. Longer years. More people involved. Greater. Jesus is giving us gifts from His standpoint of being ascended in the place of all power. The first gift He gives, obviously, is the gift of eternal life. It’s called “charisma”. Every Christian in that sense, who is born again, is charismatic, for we have all received the “charisma” of eternal life – Romans 6:23, “The wages of sin is death, but the charisma [the free gift is Jesus Christ] is eternal life through Jesus Christ.” If you have not started out at that level of receiving gifts, know today that Jesus is in a place of all power and authority, at God’s right hand, and the first gift He wants to give you is the gift of eternal life. When you’ve received that gift, then He wants you to open a whole lot more, so that you can be a dynamic, giving kind of person. And that we, as an entire body, can express the giving nature that Jesus has in His own heart. Acts 1:1 says, “A former book I wrote you, O Theophilus, of all the things that Jesus both began to do and teach.” The striking thing about that is that Luke says the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, from His birth through His ascension, is only the beginning of what Jesus did and taught. The Book of Acts, the story of the church and the story that goes on until now, is simply the continuation of what Jesus does and what Jesus says. We are Jesus’ hands in the world. We are Jesus’ eyes in the world. We are Jesus’ voice in the world TODAY. He wants His actions and His voice to come with spiritual power. That is why He has given the gifts.