

Prayers

To God

Sing to yourself (or recite) a song you know and love about the Lord you know and love. Let it speak to your soul, and lift your spirit.

For myself

Dear Jesus, I am sometimes lonely and know not who to speak to. I am sometimes tired and know not where to find strength. I am sometimes troubled and know not where to find real peace. Be my friend, be my helper, be my healer, I pray, and never leave my side. AMEN

For others

Pray for local councillors and political representatives who have responsibility for your community.

Meditation

Be bold, my friend and companion
why not cast aside the fears that hold you back
and let your spirit feel the flowing breeze of Christ

Be brave, my friend and companion
why not feel the providential impulse of the Lord
and put your body into all God's will, wholeheartedly

Be open, my friend and companion
why not crack self-centred faith's cocoon
and take the risks that mark the Spirit's movement

Be radical, my friend and companion
why not let the Gospel work its power in you
and grasp the sheer simplicity of the Saviour's call

Being bold, brave, open, and radical
are not what people expect of Christians today
why so, when this describes the Jesus whom we follow?

Bible Passage

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

¹ Now regarding spiritual things, fellow believers, I do not want you to be ignorant. ² You know that when you were pagans you were continually led astray and enticed to dumb idols. ³ Therefore I must tell you that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says, 'Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Now there are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are different kinds of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are different kinds of working, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

⁷ So to each is given the evidence of the Spirit for the benefit of all.

- ⁸To one is given a **word of wisdom** through the Spirit,
- and to another a **word of knowledge** by the same Spirit;
- ⁹to another **faith** by the same Spirit,
- and to another gifts of **healings** by the one Spirit;
- ¹⁰to another the **working of miracles**,
- to another **prophecy**,
- to another the **discernment of spirits**,
- to another various kinds of **tongues**,
- and to another the **interpretation of tongues**.

¹¹ All of these things work by means of one and the same Spirit, who allocates to each one individually just as He wishes.

Review

1 Corinthians 12 wonderfully reflects some deep truths of our faith. It is a treasure store for the preacher and a mine of information for those who wish to explore discipleship and faith. As a whole, it reveals the abiding generosity of God towards His people, and the truth of how God's people go about doing His work. Here, we read about the gifts of God's Spirit (12:4-6), given, '*for the benefit of all*' (12:7) and the chapter continues with the famous picture of the church as a 'body' (12:12-26, tomorrow's study), followed by the revelation of yet more remarkable spiritual gifts for church leadership (12:27-31)! Overall, if it was not for the awesome chapter 13 which follows, we might rate chapter 12 the climax of the whole letter!

Christ and the Holy Spirit, at the centre of our faith

Paul begins by calling on the Corinthians not to be '*ignorant*' about '*spiritual things*' (12:1); but why is he so concerned? Certainly, the impression given by 1 Corinthians is that the church there was amply blessed with spiritual gifts, especially the dramatic gift of speaking in tongues (see chapter 14). But whilst having the gifts was one thing, Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand God's purpose and intentions in giving these great blessings. They must not be the playthings of individuals or the church, they are given for a purpose. Paul offers a full Gospel perspective for these great gifts of God, and his words are as important now as ever.

So Paul reminds the Corinthians of their former selves, '*pagans*' (12:1), seduced by '*idols*' (12:2), who were used to religious practices we would find extreme, perhaps demonic! Graphic illustrations of such practices may be found within films such as, '*I, Claudius*', or '*Spartacus*'; we see people literally wash themselves with the blood of sacrificed animals, or become restrained in their common humanity by fears of curses or heavenly powers. By contrast, Christian fellowship has nothing to do with extreme spiritual behaviour, it is about living out faith in Jesus Christ by the power of His Spirit. Paul says, '*no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says, 'Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit*' (1:3). He has one objective; to sweep aside the spiritual norms of the day and set a religious standard for the churches of God; Christ alone is the object of our faith and the Spirit is His provider.

The Trinity ...

Knowing what is coming, we can read over the next three verses (12:4-6) too quickly; but they are worth dwelling upon. They speak enigmatically of spiritual gifts, but emphasise that although they are different they come from the one God who gives them. Now Paul will explain this later on in the chapter when he describes the '*body of Christ*' (12:12-26), so why does he speak about it here? I will summarise these verses to bring out something interesting:

<i>Differing gifts</i>	<i>the same Spirit</i>
<i>Differing service</i>	<i>the same Lord</i>
<i>Differing working</i>	<i>the same God</i>

Paul certainly makes a point here about 'gifts, service, and working'; placing these three together, he tells us that the spiritual gifts of God are not for personal benefit or private spirituality but for doing God's work! Then, as if to emphasise this very point, he parallels each one of '*gifts, service and working*' with a 'person' of the Trinity; '*Spirit*', '*Lord*' (Jesus), and '*God*' (12:4-6)! Together with Jesus' call to the disciples to baptise (Matt 28:19), this is one of only a few directly 'Trinitarian' statements in the Bible, describing the true nature of God, classically, as 'three in one'!

Paul's point is that the spiritual gifts are far more than the Corinthians imagine. The gift of tongues cannot be used like a badge, as if claiming that the one using the gift is a 'true' believer; the whole subject is far more complex and goes to the heart of God's revelation of Himself to humanity, in Christ. Paul does not want to dampen the Corinthian's enthusiasm for spiritual things; he wants them to recognise the gracious work of God through all His gifts.

The gifts of wisdom and knowledge

The gifts of '**wisdom**' and '**knowledge**' seem similar, but they mean far more than we imagine. The gift of '**wisdom**' is about insight into the deeper things of God, tied into the idea of 'Wisdom' in the Old Testament. The gift of '**knowledge**' however is subtly different, and more about how information is used. True knowledge is something that transforms the individual and empowers them for the work of the kingdom. So, when people pass on what they believe to be 'words' of '**knowledge**' or '**wisdom**', they do well to exercise the godliness and wisdom implied by what these words mean in the Bible, rather than merely deliver what they have perceived with scant regard for its consequences.

The gift of Faith

The gift of faith is an interesting addition to this list, and was perhaps included to make people think. Now surely, the faithful are people who have been saved by **faith**, so why does Paul speak of a spiritual '**gift**' of '**faith**'? He does so because Jesus Himself used the word **faith** in two important ways; first, He called people to have **faith** in Him as God's Son, and second, he spoke about the **faith** required to get God's work done, or, to quote, '**faith to move mountains**'. So while **faith** is necessary for salvation and discipleship, this same quality is also a spiritual gift by which God's will is done, and we do well to know the difference!

The gifts of healing and miracles

I have placed the two gifts of '**healing**' and '**miracles**' together, because again, we often see them as similar. '**Healing**', as Jesus demonstrated, is about addressing people's real physical and personal needs and helping them find wholeness and peace with God. So the **healing** ministry has always been about God's **miraculous** intervention into people's lives to transform and bless, and it can also be shown in deeds of kindness, generosity and spiritual endeavour. Casting the net wider, the Bible records many **miracles** which appear on the surface to be extraordinary feats or remarkable events, but underneath, the church recognises them as the evidence of the saving acts of God; for example, the saving of Israel from Egypt and their walk across the Red Sea. One who has a gift of '**miracles**' must therefore be someone whose work is clearly that of pointing to the redeeming and gracious acts of God. He or she is a messenger of the Lord.

The gifts of prophecy and discernment

The gift of '**prophecy**' is an age old gift, granted so that people may deliver God's Word. The Old Testament offers us many examples of such prophecy, through rebuke, analysis of the past, projection into the future, the delivery of God's Word in preaching and much more. One who has such a gift joins the honourable 'order' of prophets; those who have given themselves, sometimes their lives to do such things. Closely related to this is the gift of '**discernment**', which Paul helpfully describes as '**discernment of spirits**'. By this, he means the god-given ability to perceive the difference between good and evil. Discernment often eludes us, even with the best of intentions, and so we need people who have such a gift to help us. The proof of true discernment, like prophecy, is discovered in the future, when the fruits of evil or good are more easily observed.

The gifts of tongues and interpretation

Lastly, the gift of '**tongues**' and their '**interpretation**'. Some try to erase this gift from church life because of over enthusiasm for it by a few; but if tongues is ignored, it will continue in people's lives in a hidden manner. God will not cease to give His gifts. **Tongues** must never be seen as a private gift; after all, it is the glorious evidence of the presence of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:4), and it is an important part of what God gives His people. To speak in indiscernible languages is indeed a mystery, but it is given to the believer, like all the gifts, both as evidence of the Spirit's blessing and power, and evidence to others of the same. Paul echoes this in his extensive teaching on tongues in 1 Corinthians 14, where he regards **tongues** as entirely natural, and adds the explanation that **interpretation** is an indispensable prophetic tool designed to make what God's Word known!

Power for the benefit of all!

Each is a gift of God, individually given '*for the benefit of all*' (12:7) and '*by means of one and the same Spirit*' (12:11). As we open ourselves up to God's eternal generosity, and are ready to receive from Him without allowing our own preconditions to get in the way of His generosity, then God's work is truly done.

God gives these gifts so that we may be fulfilled not just for the sake of our spiritual sensitivity and appreciation, but so that we might prove ourselves to be God's people by doing His work in the world, *'just as he wishes'* (12:11).

Discipleship

Application

Surely there is more!

There is much more for us to understand about these gifts; how they work, how they may be best used, and where they fit into God's greater revelations. We can explore all this, of course, using the wisdom we find elsewhere in Scripture; but it is not the subject of this passage. Paul lists the gifts not to explain them, but to remind us they exist and remind us we must use them to do God's work and to help each other. God stands open hearted in offering us His gracious gifts, and it is then up to us to receive them, explore them, and use them as directed. There is no point analysing them if we will not receive them!

I have been in too many situations in which people have been willing to discuss the gifts of God, but highly unwilling to receive or use what God longs to give, and this is the mark of a church that is dying. The work of God is not done by our effort, but by our using the power and energy God will give us as we exercise the gifts He has given us.

Gifts given for the benefit of all

In writing about the gifts, I have not sought to dwell on current experiences of these gifts, or the controversies surrounding them. There are so many books on this subject it is extraordinary; books on the gift of tongues alone run to probably thousands, and there is a veritable industry in healing ministry available to the local church, advocated through publications about methods and experiences. They must never be allowed to become a substitute for experiencing the truth of what God can do in the life of a believer.

Paul's desire in writing here is to get the Corinthians to place the gifts of God in their proper context, and his motives are relevant to us because we perhaps need to read what he says for the same reasons as those who first read the letter. We must understand that there are many gifts, and they are to be used for God's work and the good of all. We must stop being dominated by discussions about embarrassment over tongues, or wondering what healing means while avoiding the study of what Jesus did, or trying to morph gifts of 'wisdom' and 'knowledge' into our modern 'words of knowledge' without grasping what these Scriptural words mean. Then, we may find that when God really does give us the gifts we need to do His will, the church of God is really built up!

Ideas for what to do

- *As you read about these amazing things, wait on God for Him to bless you with His gifts.*
- *If you find it hard to understand some of these 'gifts', speak with someone you respect, and pray about why you find them hard to understand*

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How can God's people demonstrate their unity through the use of spiritual gifts, as God intends?
2. Discuss the meaning of each of the spiritual gifts within your group, and share how you think they can best be used.
3. How can you as a church of God go about becoming a group of people amongst whom the spiritual gifts are received and used?

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, giver of all good things, bless Your people with the gifts they need to live their lives in Christian fellowship and do Your will. May your Kingdom come and Your will be done! AMEN