

Prayers

Opening prayer

We praise You, Lord God. You have never let us down even though we have often failed You, and You have loved us even when we return after wandering far away from You. You know what is best for each one of us, and You have chosen us for glory despite our unworthiness. We praise You for the blessings You give us so generously, and we ask that You make us worthy of our great calling. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

Pray silently for the state of the world. In quietness, pour out your feelings about what you see on television, how you feel about ecological issues, and more. Then pray out loud to ask the Lord to come in glory!

On-going prayers

- **Pray for remote churches.** *Pray for Christians in China and the millions of people in that country who have to celebrate their faith 'underground' because of official or unofficial persecution*
- *Give thanks to God for the people you meet today, especially any who appear to you to be annoying and difficult*
- *Pray for all those who have been affected by the things that have dominated the news in your own country.*

Meditation

You have done so much for us, Lord Jesus;
and have chosen us even before we were born.

You have made us by the Spirit, within the womb;
and have blessed us with gifts and personal identity.

You have opened our ears to Your Word, to love it;
and have given us friends to help us grow in our faith.

You have challenged us to live by faith in the world;
and have given us opportunities to mature in discipleship.

You have opened our eyes to perceive truth and justice;
and have helped us persevere so that we might become strong.

You have led us to testify to our salvation and our Saviour;
and have given a sure and certain hope of Your 'Coming Again'

You will bring our lives to an end, and take us home to You.
and complete Your promise to bless our faith in glory, Alleluia!

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 12: 7-11

⁷ To each is given the evidence of the Spirit for the benefit of all. ⁸ To one is given a word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another a word of knowledge by the same Spirit; ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit; ¹⁰ to 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

This great passage of Scripture contains Paul's famous list of 'spiritual gifts', by which God has blessed His people since the earliest of days in the Christian church. Some people know when they receive these gifts and seek to use them by God's guidance, others demonstrate them though barely knowing about them, they need to be pointed out within the fellowship of the church. But however they are received and perceived, this list has helped generations of Christians understand more of God's gracious love and grasp what He wants of them as His servants in the world. As this passage so clearly describes, God gives these gifts graciously to those who love Him, so that they can do His work on earth.

Apart from our reading today, there are three other lists of gifts, found in Romans 12:6-8, in Ephesians 4:11-12 and surprisingly, in verse 28 of this same chapter of 1 Corinthians. Sometimes, all of these gifts are added together to make one compendium of God's graciousness. However each list is different, not just in the specific gifts mentioned (although there is some overlap) but in what they mean. The list in Romans identifies gifts of specific service within the church; the list in Ephesians describes the gifts by which the church is built up for the work of evangelism; lastly, the list in 1 Corinthians 12:28 is a list of appointments within the Church, necessary for its good order.

Now the list in this passage is defined by Paul as *'the evidence of the Spirit for the benefit of all'* (12:7), which means that these gifts are for the benefit both of the individual, and for the church at large. But what does this mean? The phrase *'for the benefit of all'* could mean two things. Firstly, that the gifts are proof of God's individual blessing, and secondly that although the gifts are given individually, they are to be used for the benefit of the whole community of God's church. In the light of everything we have read in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, we can only conclude that the passage means neither one thing or the other, it means both. The gifts are given individually, by *'one and the same spirit'* (12:11) for the benefit of all.

We should notice one thing before we look further at these gifts. God gives them primarily so that they will be used, that is, they are given for a purpose. Paul is only a hair's breadth away from saying here that the gifts 'build up the Body of Christ' (this is his point in Ephesians 4:12), and throughout, we get a sense of purpose and action. Of course, the Holy Spirit is indeed God 'in action', and it comes as no surprise that in verse 11, Paul speaks of the gifts as 'working' by means of the Holy Spirit. God gives the gifts, and the Holy Spirit uses them in the individual to do God's work in the Church and the world. To this extent, their use is evidence of God's work amongst his people. This is a basic truth that we must not forget when we look at the individual gifts and their profound impact upon both individuals and the church.

In the 'going deeper' section of the Bible study, we look at the gifts in greater detail, but as a whole, they make up a remarkable collection of personal attributes and powers. Nine gifts are listed, wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, poverty, discernment of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues.

The first three gifts are perhaps most easily understood. It is obvious that some people are wise and knowledgeable, and others clearly exercise great faith. Now we should be careful, for we must not be sidetracked into thinking that these gifts are natural human attributes, because they are specifically given by God. For example, when we speak of knowledge as being the gift of God, we mean that an individual otherwise unaware of having any academic merit, discovers that God has given him or her a heart to study the Bible in depth, and thence serve the church as a teacher. People so gifted do not parade their knowledge, because they know that it comes from God and not on themselves. Obviously, the church cannot afford to have people teaching the Bible without such a gifting.

Going further we read about gifts of healing and miracles. Throughout the history of the church, God has worked through individuals to heal and perform miracles, in sometimes a relatively low-key manner, and sometimes far more overtly. The same principle applies; these things are manifestly the result of God's gift if the glory for them goes to Him, not to those who have used the gifts or to those benefitting from them.

Towards the end, we find the gift of prophecy and discernment of spirits, followed by tongues and interpretation of tongues. We will be talking about these further when we look at 1 Corinthians 14 so we will wait for a fuller explanation of them. Now, however, it is vital that we do not let our personal feelings about these gifts colour our appreciation of them, and their benefit to the whole church. If today, we have failed to fully appreciate them, or have come to disregard them because we do not have them or dislike their use in church, then it is we who have a problem and not God. He longs to give these gifts to us for our benefit, and if we do not understand them, then we should seek God's wisdom in prayer.

This review has perhaps been rather long, but the issues involved are enormous. This is one of very few passages of Scripture, where we are given a clear insight into God's blessing and empowerment of individuals so that they can do His work in the world. Of course the whole of Scripture speaks of these things but the list of gifts offers specific insight, which is not for our personal benefit but for the good of all. If the church ever loses its way in its understanding of these gifts then it has truly wandered into a wilderness.

The gifts are of great importance, and they must not be sidelined in our attempts to understand God's work either in us or in the church.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Words of wisdom and knowledge (12:8)
- Faith and healing (12:9)
- Miracles, prophecy and discernment (12:10)
- Tongues and interpretation (12:10)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V7 'the evidence of the Spirit for the benefit of all.'

The word I have translated as 'evidence' is usually translated as 'manifestation'. The Greek word 'phanerosis' refers to bringing something to light, and although the traditional theological word for this is manifestation, I think that the English word 'evidence' now means the same thing, and is more readily understood by people.

V8 'a word of wisdom ... a word of knowledge ...'

Bible versions translate all this in widely different ways. The Greek, however, is simple; 'logos sophias ... logos gnoseos' meaning 'a word of wisdom ... a word of knowledge...'. The reason why some expand this to expressions such as 'utterance of wisdom ... utterance of knowledge' (NRSV) or 'message of wisdom ... message of knowledge ...' (NIV) is because the Greek 'logos' refers to all kinds of speech, and different translators suggest that in the context of spiritual gifts, this might have a specific meaning according to their suggestions. There is no reason to try and be this specific, and it is best to leave the translation as open as the original suggests.

V10 'working of miracles'

The Greek here ('energmata dunameon') means literally 'works of power'. However, the word 'dunamis' in its various forms is used frequently to refer to Jesus' miraculous works, and for this reason, we reasonably expect that the early church used this word to refer to miracles. This point is accepted by most translations.

V10 'various kinds of tongues'

The Greek word for 'tongues' here is simply the plural of the usual word in Greek for tongue 'glossa', which also means 'languages'. It would be perfectly correct to translate this 'various kinds of languages'. However, unlike other words used in this text, there is no doubt that the Bible uses this word to refer to a special and distinct spiritual gift of a mystical kind, as found in Acts 2:4f. and other places. It is therefore best to retain this special sense by translating 'tongues'.

Words of wisdom and knowledge (12:8)

Below is a list of the nine spiritual gifts in this passage:

1. Word of wisdom (v8)
2. Word of knowledge (v8)
3. Faith (v9)
4. Healing (v9)
5. Working miracles (works of power – v10)
6. Prophecy (v10)
7. Discernment of spirits (v10)
8. Various tongues (v10)
9. Interpretation of tongues (v10)

Some have tried to find some meaning within the structure of this list, and why there are nine spiritual gifts, but over the centuries, the search has been unfruitful. We must accept that Paul simply wrote a list of as many spiritual gifts as he could think of at the time, and the Holy Spirit has inspired his 'words of knowledge' so that they are now our Scripture!

The first gifts mentioned in this passage are 'wisdom and knowledge'. These two words are both attached to the Greek word 'logos', meaning 'word'. This suggests that the gifts of wisdom and knowledge are not to do merely with having these qualities, and many people do, but something to do with being able to communicate them. Wisdom is a word with a special Biblical pedigree (see the book of Proverbs, or

Ecclesiastes), so it is likely Paul meant that the gift of wisdom was the New Testament equivalent of this special gift of spiritual and practical insight.

So what does 'word of knowledge' mean? Many Christians today associate this with what happens when a preacher says things about people in a congregation as if by special, God-given knowledge; calling for people to come forward for healing with certain specific conditions, for example. I do not doubt that such gifts exist or are used effectively, as long as those who use such methods understand that they must be careful and stay close to the Lord. It is easy for non-Christians to think these preachers use the same techniques as fortune tellers and mystics, who are known to use bland statements to attract the attention of those who are gullible. 'Words of knowledge' like this must stand above such criticism. Personally, I think such techniques are forms of prophetic utterance rather than what Paul means here.

If we examine scripture, the words 'knowledge' and 'word' are used very openly and generally. Moreover, the Bible normally avoids suggesting that the word 'knowledge' refers to any kind of a special knowledge, because it wants to avoid the idea common in the Greek / Roman world that one can only access God through special knowledge obtained exclusively and personally from God. I therefore suggest that 'word of knowledge' means the gift to communicate true godly knowledge, as we find in those special people who seem to be able to explain the truths of God and the Bible to us with power. This is more than the gift of teaching in the general sense, and most Christians know it when they hear it!

Faith and healing (12:9)

The gift of faith is a little difficult to explain, because faith is the one thing God asks of all who come to Him; 'For by grace You have been saved by faith' (Eph 2:8). However, the word 'faith' covers a wide range, and we also use it to refer to special acts of faith, or as both Paul and Jesus said 'faith to move mountains' (1 Cor 13:2, Matt 17:20, 21:21). There is no other way of explaining the spiritual gift of faith, but in practice, we see the gift of faith in people who are given a Godly call to do what seems to everyone else to be impossible, often in the building up of the church and the Kingdom of God, and especially in missionary endeavour or evangelism.

In the same way, the gift of healing is not a gift that should surprise us. The body, of course heals of itself whether physically, mentally or spiritually, but in each case, it can become compromised, through disease or infection, through mental disorder, or spiritual issues such as anger, stress or diseases, and complex personal disorders such as bulimia. In Jesus' day and in ours, people dealt with illness either by waiting for the body to recover or through specific medical intervention, and today, the medical world has developed methods of healing far more successfully than in Jesus' day. Nevertheless, for many reasons, large numbers of people remain in need of healing, as Jesus knew and as we know. It was a significant part of Jesus' ministry to heal lepers, blind people and others, and deliver those afflicted by demons; so we should expect Him to give the gift of healing to His disciples. Jesus said He would do this in His ministry (Matt 10:1, Mark 16:17f. etc.). In this list, Paul merely confirms this logical consequence of discipleship.

Miracles, prophecy and discernment (12:10)

Just as we explained the gift of healing, something similar can be said of the gift 'the working of miracles'. This is not the place to discuss whether people believe in miracles, for the whole of Jesus' ministry is filled with miracles. The Greek word 'dunamis' used by Paul for this gift (see notes above) appears frequently in the Gospels, including at Jesus' calming of the storm (Matt 8:23f. etc), the feedings of the four and five thousand (Matt 14:13f. and 15:32f.), and more. Other, different miracles take place today and some are the result of a gift given to people who either pray for miracles or have faith for them. However, the classic Biblical understanding of a sign or a miracle is that it is an unexplainable event by which people are blessed supernaturally, but which speaks powerfully of the saving power of Christ and the authority of the Father. If we open our hearts and minds to the miraculous, it is all around us. But we should not be carried away, for any spiritual gift must surely be part of the Spirit's work to demonstrate the Kingdom of God and lead people to salvation. Miracles are not given for mere personal benefit; to think of them as such insults Christ.

The gift of prophecy is similar, though it includes what people consider 'words of knowledge' as practiced by some preachers and healers today (see above). As with other gifts, our Biblical understanding of them has changed since the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. From that day, as prophesied by Joel (2:28f.), the gift of prophecy has become widely available, far more widely than we imagine. It is my view that whenever we seek to say something Godly, whether as advice to a friend or in the preaching of the Gospel, we exercise prophetic gifts. Indeed, lack of clarity about this has led God's people today to misunderstand the gift of prophecy, which is simply telling other people what God has first told us. Society's maxim is to 'say what we think' in all circumstances; but the Christian should say 'No' to this, and seek to speak only what is worth saying because we know what the Lord would have us say. Of course we will speak as we feel led, but such a motive will discipline our words and make for good discipleship. Beyond this, of course, the Spirit gives special gifts of prophecy for more important tasks, such as preaching and declaring God's Word to the world. There are plenty of good models for this gift within the Bible, especially the Old Testament. It is

a matter of gaining a right perspective on God's Pentecostal desire that 'all' might prophesy (Joel 2:28, 1 Cor 14:31).

The gift of discernment of spirits has also caused unhelpful controversy in some parts of the church today, but this only happens where people retain a basic philosophy that evil does not really exist. Unfortunately, many believe this and it sometimes drifts into the church, but it is not a Biblical perspective. The Bible speaks of evil as a personal entity, and the New Testament demonstrates a complex multilayered description of evil, Satan, the devil, 'the enemy', Beelzebul and all evil. Discernment is the Godly ability to see the difference between what is good and what is evil. Again, many experience this as a general facet of faith, but the Spirit also gives this gift as a special gift to aid ministries such as deliverance, healing or evangelism, where it is indispensable. A general understanding of what it means helps us accept our common responsibilities to be discerning in the life of the church, and also to recognise the value of the specific spiritual gift.

Tongues and interpretation (12:10)

The gift of tongues has created immense discussion in the life of the church, and I do not intend to reproduce it here! Whilst many debate what it means, those who know this gift because it has been given to them know that it is nothing to do with 'ecstasy' in which people are given over to a trance like state of consciousness in religious fervour. To suggest this is plain ignorant, because those who use this gift today use it in a perfectly sane mind, to allow the spirit to speak within, without the constraints of human language. I find it amazing that some say that without language they cannot conceive of communication with God, but there are so many spiritual experiences that defy words, it is surely obvious that if we let go of language and allow our minds to address God, then we are liberated into worship and praise, for example, and not hindered. As such, this gift is an amazing personal blessing and an incredible means of prophetic blessing on people who worship together (when accompanied by interpretation).

The gift of tongues is 'various' as this passage suggests. Paul does not say here 'speaking in tongues', but 'various tongues' (or possibly, 'various languages'). He knew what he was talking about. People who are blessed with the gift of tongues speak in unknown languages and utterances, and sometimes known ones, and they are certainly varied! Some have testified to hearing someone speaking in tongues, yet knowing themselves the language spoken where the one speaking knew not what he or she was saying. Recent research has shown that people have experienced this gift throughout far more of history than we suspect, in particular from centuries in which history was written by scholars and intellectuals who were not interested in recording the spiritual experiences of mere individuals. Even Wesley, the eighteenth century evangelist, sometimes described 'strange utterances' at his meetings, but refrained from saying more; frankly, he did not understand it or make any connection between what he observed and these scriptures.

Complementing the gift of tongues, it is not surprising that God has given the gift of interpretation of tongues. Any use of language involves interpretation, and the mystical 'speaking in tongues' certainly needs this when used in public! We will not look any further at this gift here, because Paul discusses it at length in chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians.

Discipleship

Application

The spiritual gifts have created great tension in some churches, where people have a variety of strange views about them or about individual gifts. I find it strange that some insist that certain of these gifts either do not exist or are improper, when Paul clearly describes how important they all are within this text. It is as if some will pick and choose what scriptures they will 'believe' in! I also find it unhelpful when people focus on this scripture with no intent other than to bolster their pre-conceived ideas about everything from prophecy to speaking in tongues. We must allow scripture to speak to us, and not assume what God's Word says before we have examined it closely.

The description above of the different gifts of the Spirit cannot be exhaustive, but I have attempted to give an insight into these extraordinary and powerful gifts of God, insofar as they are listed in this passage, relate to scripture, and experienced in real life today. It remains for me to observe that in each case, I have been able to describe some setting of Christian service, worship or work in which the gift is relevant. This fulfils our need to explain the gifts properly in the light of 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, and the fact that Paul describes the gifts throughout as 'of the one Spirit'. Each gift is valuable, and distinct, but each is a product of the one Spirit and united in testifying to the Gospel of Christ. There is no difference between our advocacy of the gifts of the Spirit as the way God empowers His people, and Christ's commission to all His disciples to 'Go into all the world ...' (Matt 28:19). For this reason, the sharp differences between evangelicals, and charismatics or

Pentecostals, is scandalous. The Bible sees all this as God's 'Good News', all pointing to Christ, and empowering His people to do His work and be His people. Such division within our churches, whether spoken or not, are pure scandal and an offence to the Almighty.

It is my hope that in reading this study, you will not conclude that the gifts of the Spirit are anything other than the benevolent gifts of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, given to enable His people to fulfil their individual and collective calling.

Questions for groups

1. How can God's people demonstrate their unity through the use of spiritual gifts, as God intends?
2. Why do some people find some of the gifts difficult to understand, and which ones seem difficult or hard to understand, to you?
3. Discuss the meaning of each of the spiritual gifts within your group, and share how you think they can best be used.

Discipleship challenges

- *If there are one or two spiritual gifts that you have been given, then set them before God in prayer, and ask Him how He wants you to use them. Let Him guide you in how to use your 'gifts'*
- *If you feel that you are not sure about which gifts you have received or whether it is right to receive them, seek a close spiritual friend and ask them to pray with you about these gifts. Within that prayer, you may find that you are blessed by the gracious gifts of the Holy Spirit.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, help us all to be patient with life. If things have not gone well for us today, may we offer them to You and wait for better things tomorrow. May we seek to use the spiritual gifts and grace you have given us to rise above our problems and deal with things better. In this way, Lord Jesus, let us put our faith into action; AMEN
