

Week 12, 1 Corinthians 12

Hook



Main Point: Spiritual gifts are from God for the common good of the body.

Current Event

Do you have a talent that you've allowed to remain unused? Below is a list of celebrities who proved that it is never too late to begin to explore your gifts.

Julia Child. *Prior to culinary fame, this icon had a vibrant career as an intelligence officer with the Office of Strategic Services (a forerunner to the CIA).¹*

Sylvester Stallone. *Before Rocky fame, Stallone cleaned animal cages in Central Park Zoo.²*

Andrea Bocelli. *Before his music career took off, Bocelli worked as a defense attorney.³*

Jon Bon Jovi. *Before he recorded his first single "Runaway," Bon Jovi had previous experience in a recording studio- he served as a studio's janitor.⁴*

Sean Connery. *Prior to making a splash in Hollywood, Connery worked as a truck driver, lifeguard and coffin polisher.⁵*

¹ <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2007-featured-story-archive/julia-child.html>

² <http://www.biography.com/people/sylvester-stallone-9491745#early-life>

³ <http://www.biography.com/people/andrea-bocelli-9216943#early-years>

⁴ <http://www.lifebuzz.com/fame/2/>

⁵ <http://www.lifebuzz.com/fame/5/>

At what point in your life did you begin to grasp your true talents and skills? Did that understanding alter your career plans?

At what point in your Christian walk did you begin to understand your spiritual gift(s)? How have you been using your spiritual gifts to build up the Church?

How does someone begin to understand his spiritual gift(s)? What is the danger in believers' not practicing their spiritual gifts?

Week 12, 1 Corinthians 12

Book

Main Point: Spiritual gifts are from God for the common good of the body.

Text Summary: 1 Corinthians 12

Paul draws the line between true Christian spirituality and paganism, this time as it relates to spiritual gifts. True spirituality is about exalting *God* and sharing gifts for the sake of others, not exalting *self* and hoarding gifts for status among others. While Paul lists many specific gifts in this section, they are not exhaustive,⁶ nor are they the chief point of the passage. While the spiritual gifts are important, this section's primary emphasis is on glorifying God, edifying others, and maintaining unity in the church.⁷

1 Corinthians 12:1–11 [Read]

Sub-point: Spiritual gifts are sourced by God, reflect Him, and serve others.

Paul starts chapter 12 with irony. These Corinthian believers haughtily assume they have much knowledge regarding “spiritual things,” and by stating that he does not want them to be “uninformed” in verse 1, Paul exposes just how ignorant they truly are.⁸ (Note that “spiritual gifts” can be translated as *spiritual things* or even *spiritual persons*).⁹

Verses 2–3 reveal that these believers have asked to know more about spiritual things. To start his response, Paul undoes their pagan view of spirituality and replaces it with a Christian one. In the Corinthian culture at the time, using the name of one's god to invoke a curse on others was common. In becoming Christians, these Corinthians assumed they could summon the name of Jesus to bring curses on other people. Paul turns this view upside down by saying, in essence, “No one speaking in the Spirit asks Jesus to bring a curse on others! To call Jesus “Lord” is to *accept* suffering, not *cause* it. Being a Christian requires willingness to *love* in return for hate and to *bless* in return for curse.”¹⁰ In verse 3, Paul maintains that only the Holy Spirit could empower this type of thought since it was diametrically opposite of pagan ideas.

As elsewhere in 1 Corinthians, Paul exposes these believers for once again having imported popular pagan practice into Christianity. According to Paul, no one who is truly spiritual seeks to

⁶ Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 288.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

⁸ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 160.

⁹ Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 279.

¹⁰ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 162.

disadvantage another, and no one can truly confess Jesus as Lord without the Spirit's empowerment.¹¹

Now that Paul has stated what God's purpose in spiritual things is *not* about, verses 4–11 clarify what God's purpose in spiritual things *is* about. Verses 4–10 focus on the source of spiritual gifts as God, not man. It is difficult to miss how trinitarian Paul's language is. While spiritual gifts come in many varieties, they are all empowered by the "same Spirit ... same Lord ... same God" (vv. 4–6). The godhead alone sources our spiritual gifting; we cannot earn it or produce it on our own. These verses show that God is a great giver, and spiritual abilities are *gifts*, not rewards, that must be received humbly. In a culture obsessed with achievement, this would be a difficult word for the Corinthians to hear from the apostle.¹²

Paul also makes a clever parallel in this section. Verses 4–7 reveal that each person of the triune godhead executes different roles in the giving of spiritual gifts. Each of the assignments within the Trinity is diverse, yet at the same time, the gifts are completely unified in purpose to build up the saints. Paul calls the believers to mimic the Trinity in that way—to be diverse in gifting, but unified in purpose.¹³ In sum, these believers are to imitate their diverse, giving God by using their varied gifts to build up the "common good" of the body (v. 7). As it relates to the spiritual gifts themselves, two things stand out in this section: 1) every Christian possesses a spiritual gift (v. 11) and 2) the gifts are varied.

Paul's goal is not to list all of the spiritual gifts available or even to define those he lists; his aim is to remind the believers that all gifts come from God and are to be used to achieve one purpose. Verse 8 mentions the utterance of wisdom and the utterance of knowledge; the distinction between the two is not identified in the verse.¹⁴ However, these speech gifts would have been in exact opposition to the "wisdom of the world" in 1 Corinthians 1:17. The "wisdom of the world" was simply clever speech from men and thus void of power. The wisdom and knowledge that Paul mentions here are gifts given to particular believers that are sourced from the Spirit for the good of the body.¹⁵

The next grouping of gifts, following speech gifts, are faith, gifts of healing and miracles. The faith mentioned in verse 9 is distinct from the faith that all believers possess; this kind of faith most likely believes God for extraordinary things or helps to prod the church forward during exceptional times.¹⁶ As Taylor explains, the gifts of healing and miracles, although not defined here, would have resulted in the "edification of the church as a whole and the confirmation of

¹¹ Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 285.

¹² Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 213.

¹³ Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 286-287.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 289

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 289

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 289

one's faith in God rather than the wisdom of man."¹⁷ Of the remaining gifts, Paul will spend the majority of chapter 14 on the subject of tongues and the interpretation of tongues in connection to prophecy.

Paul asserts that truly spiritual people seek to do four things with their spiritual gifting: receive it humbly as a gift instead of a reward, view it as sourced by God and not self, reflect the diverse and unified nature of the Trinity, and serve others for the common good of the body.

Why does Paul bring up “mute idols” in verse 2?

What is the danger in a lack of humility when exercising spiritual gifts? What practices might help the believer to avoid arrogance when exercising spiritual gifts?

How many times does Paul use the word “same” in verses 4–11? Why is this important?

According to verse 7, our spiritual gifts are also called what?

1 Corinthians 12:12–31 [Read]

Sub-point: The church is one unified body with many diverse members.

In verses 12–31, Paul expounds on the theme of unity and diversity found within verses 4–11. To communicate how unity and diversity can simultaneously be practiced, Paul uses his famous body analogy. A human body works seamlessly and organically as one unit, yet it also exhibits great diversity in its members.¹⁸ While all the members have specific and separate functions, they are also integrally dependent on one another for health. Paul desires these Corinthian believers to operate the same way in their local church. His fourfold motif of “the one and the many” drives home his desire for these believers to operate as one unit with diverse gifts (vv. 12, 14, 20, 27).¹⁹

As it relates to operating as a body, Paul makes four clear assertions in verses 15–20. The first is that each member is equally considered part of the body. This assertion means that there is no such thing as an insignificant gift or person in the body of Christ. The second assertion is that each member of the body has a unique function. Paul's logical questions are self-explanatory; there would be no actual body if every member were the same. The third assertion is that God is the arranger of the body (v. 18). This assertion corrects the Corinthians from believing that

¹⁷ Ibid., 289

¹⁸ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 222.

¹⁹ Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 294.

they can somehow muster up, earn, or redistribute spiritual gifts within their church to gain status. The gifting and placement of each member in the body is *God's* decision, not man's.²⁰

In verses 21–27, Paul narrows his focus to the weaker members of the church. The shameful treatment of the poor at the Lord's Supper as previously studied in chapter 11 is undoubtedly in the background of Paul's words here.²¹ The “head and the eye” in verse 21 are obvious references to those who believed they had higher status than their peers within the Corinthian church.²² To combat this hierarchical attitude, Paul reminds them that the members of the body need one another equally (v. 21), weaker members are indispensable (vv. 22–23; cf. 1:25, 27), God gives greater honor to members who lack it (v. 24), and what affects one member affects all members (v. 26).²³ His central concern in all of these assertions is clear: “that there be no division in the body” so that it can healthily care for itself (v. 25). Spiritual gifts are yet another place this Corinthian church is divided. Above all and consistent with his message throughout this letter, Paul ultimately desires their *unity*.

Verses 27–31 make up the final bookend to the chapter with essentially the same message as verses 1–4, yet with some additional elements. Paul lists a variety of gifts here, but makes an important distinction between offices and gifts. Apostles, prophets and teachers are offices while the rest are gifts.²⁴ His point in these verses mirrors his previous assertion: offices and gifts are appointed by God, and are purposefully varied. In keeping with the context of the entire chapter, Paul ends by exhorting these believers to seek the most “useful” or “beneficial” gift in their church. Paul's meaning in “higher” as denoting a gift is not related to status or power, but is instead whatever gift is currently needed to edify the whole in the best way.²⁵

In sum, the believers in Corinth are to act as one unified body with many diverse parts, all seeking to edify one another in the power of the Spirit under God's sovereign appointment and design.

How many times does Paul use the word “one” in verses 12–31? Why is this important?

Paul assumes these believers have all undergone what symbolic entrance into the body (verse 13)?

How does Romans 12:3–15 inform our reading of this chapter?

²⁰ Ibid., p. 297-298.

²¹ Ibid., p. 299.

²² Ibid. p. 299.

²³ Ibid., p. 299-300.

²⁴ Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 301-302.

²⁵ Ibid., p.302.

What does a healthy church body look like? How are you currently using your spiritual gifts for the betterment of the body?

Week 12, 1 Corinthians 12

Took



Main Point: Spiritual gifts are from God for the common good of the body.

Activity

Understanding comes before action. Challenge your class to take a spiritual gifts assessment (a free assessment is made available by LifeWay) here:

https://www.lifeway.com/lwc/files/lwcF_PDF_Discover_Your_Spiritual_Gifts.pdf

Lesson Conclusion

As the theme throughout 1 Corinthians indicates, these believers are divided. Just as their practices of worship and the Lord's Supper were marked by division and contention in chapter 11, so chapter 12 reveals that their practice of spiritual gifts also smacks of discord. Paul's teaching in this chapter reminds them that the entire purpose of spiritual gifts is to reflect the diverse nature of the triune God and serve one another for the sake of unity and healthiness. He leaves them with the admonishment that if they are to desire any gift at all, they should desire the one most beneficial for others. These Corinthian believers desired to know more about what it means to be a spiritual person—and Paul gives them a clear answer: one who sees his or her gifting as an endowment from God made to reflect His nature, and who exercises that gift for the common good of others instead of personal gain.

Challenge

Use your spiritual gifts. While scholars debate over which gifts are still applicable today, we know that every single believer has been gifted by God to minister to others. For the sake of the common good, we should all assess where God has gifted us, else we are depriving the body and disobeying God.²⁶ Choose to serve the body this week through the use of your gift.

Repent of hierarchical thinking. Like some of the Corinthian believers in verses 21–25, we can fall into pride about our gifts. We sometimes deem others as insignificant or dispensable because their gifts, personalities or walks with God don't look like ours. List by name those you

²⁶ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 214.

silently consider yourself better than in your church. Repent for each by name, and pray for God's blessing over their life and ministry.

Fight insecurity. While some of us consider ourselves better than others, there are those of us who struggle with the opposite problem, as seen in verses 14–20. Some of us believe that because we're not wired like "the varsity Christians," we're not legitimate members of the body. List out the insecurities you have about your gifting and/or personality in a column. Now list scriptural passages that fight each insecurity in a second column. This week, pray through this list daily and ask God to embolden the use of your gifts for His glory and His church.