

Spiritual Gifts

12 ¹⁻³ What I want to talk about now is the various ways God's Spirit gets worked into our lives. This is complex and often misunderstood, but I want you to be informed and knowledgeable. Remember how you were when you didn't know God, led from one phony god to another, never knowing what you were doing, just doing it because everybody else did it? It's different in this life. God wants us to use our intelligence, to seek to understand as well as we can. For instance, by using your heads, you know perfectly well that the Spirit of God would never prompt anyone to say "Jesus be damned!" Nor would anyone be inclined to say "Jesus is Master!" without the insight of the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁻¹¹ God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful:

wise counsel

clear understanding

simple trust

healing the sick

miraculous acts

proclamation
distinguishing between spirits
tongues
interpretation of tongues.

All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what, and when.

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1 Corinthians 12: 1-12

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I got a rather unusual message this week from someone who was part of my high school graduating class. The joys of Facebook, right? Because I share snippets of my life with such a wide variety of friends and acquaintances from all the schools I've attended, jobs I've had, and communities I've lived in, the pieces of me that were familiar way back in my high school days may have some notable discontinuities now, and with reason, people get curious.

The message began cautiously, she said, "I have a question for you. And I hope you don't mind. This has bugged me for awhile and I didn't have the courage to ask. For some reason I swore in high school you didn't believe in God."

The question didn't surprise me all that much. In high school, I had a few friends from "Other" Christian traditions that were dead-set on getting me "saved." It was weird for them that I attended church, seemed to like it actually, and yet, I did not subscribe to the same list of Christian beliefs and ways of being that were mandated by their church communities. I could question God, trust in science, and not have to buy into anything about women being submissive and not talking out over boys in the class. I remember laughing out loud when I heard the rumor someone started that I must be a witch. It sounded fun – and this was before Harry Potter came out and every middle school student wanted to get their letter from Hogwarts.

Well, of course I responded to my friend's inquiry. I guess she figured out that I believe in God now that my Facebook profile talks about my work in ministry and often has posts about spiritual kinds of things. I told her that I had always felt connected to God, though there were plenty of times I hadn't looked the part! We had a brief, but fun conversation, and chatting with her made me think about the kinds of lists we use to determine what a Christian looks like in the world.

A lot of times those lists are used, not for educational purposes, but to figure out who's in and who's out of a particular sub-set of the tradition. This is not new. Even at the time of scripture's composition there were those who wanted to put religious requirements on belonging to a community. There were early arguments about circumcision and following food traditions. Then there were arguments about which doctrines and understandings of Jesus would be acceptable to the church as it became more connected with the state. In our own era we've seen Christian fundamentalism on the rise which began with a particular set of beliefs that were seen as essential to being a "true Christian" – things like the inerrancy of scripture and a literal understanding of the Virgin Birth. Now we get church splits over gay marriage cleverly disguised as arguments about biblical interpretation or understandings of the Christology of Jesus. Or we get folks who claim that unless you have a strong environmental stance and are willing to divest from unscrupulous corporations, then you're not being "Christian enough." And yet as different as these lists appear essentially all of them are similar. They are not about having eyes for seeing God in the world; they are about making judgments of who has right interpretation of the faith and who doesn't.

It is easy to spread high school rumors about who really believes in God and who doesn't. It is easy to say that the "other side" isn't Christian enough. It's practically inevitable

when it comes to human nature to want to discern who's right and who isn't. It makes us feel like we can claim a superiority over others, which fluffs our ego, and distances us from the rest of the pack.

But Jesus didn't come into our world so that Christians could be right. He came into the world so that there would be more love. The comparison game doesn't make us any better at being loving. In fact, it usually makes us far worse. And yet, we want to know, and have reason to want to know if we are doing what Jesus would want us to do in the world. If we can't be perfect followers, can we at least be "good enough" followers? If we can't make external determinations based on who comes to church regularly, and who gives, and who has the right statement of faith, and things like that, what can we do?

Well, when it comes to lists, oddly enough, I think Paul has some rather good ones in his writing. His words are often twisted to say the kind of things we don't want to say with our lists, but if we read his lists with some context and an open way of listening, perhaps he can help us out. I particularly like how Eugene Peterson translates the introduction to this list in scripture. The Message translation reads: *Each person is given something to do that shows who God is. Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful.*

Rather than this being a list of how you will know who the Christians are, it lines up slightly differently. It suggests that what people, all kinds of people, are already doing in the world to bring more love into it, are the very things that show us who God is. That's different. It doesn't say that this is how you will know the perfect Christians. It doesn't say that you have to do all 9 things each and every day. It says that maybe you'll do some on certain days and be

called to do others on other days. It reminds us that the Spirit hands out these gifts, and they aren't ours to subscribe to or determine by human will power. And all these gifts are varied, diverse, and all lovely.

So what are they? Wise counsel, clear understanding, simple trust, healing the sick, miraculous acts, proclamation, discerning between spirits, knowing language, and interpreting language. Those are things you do and you see, not things you believe or deny. I like that. And they all require some level of cooperation. Wise counsel and clear understanding are things that aren't just mine to own, but they may be mine to share. Likewise the other gifts as well.

So I'm going to read the list again – slowly and with a little bit of elaboration – so that you can find yourself in it or thank God for how you see other people in it. This isn't a list for comparison, but a list for thanksgiving and joy in seeing God at work in the world.

Friends, each person, *each person* is given something to do that shows who God is.

wise counsel – Not just advice, but true wisdom, the offer of life experience

clear understanding – Knowledge, not used to belittle, but to encourage

simple trust – faith, not certainty

healing the sick – gifts of doctors, nurses, or the person who waits with you for the test results

miraculous acts – the surprising serendipities of life, the light at the end of a hopeless situation

proclamation/prophesy – the truth tellers and justice seekers who help cast your vision of the world

distinguishing between spirits – the people in your life who helped you navigate all the gray areas between black and white

tongues – the poets, the artists, the singers, the dancers, the actors and composers who invoke feeling and magic beyond the words

interpretation of tongues – the counselors, the deep thinkers and heartfelt prayers who help us make meaning in our world today

This list may not help you pass any test of Christianity, but I do think that these are the things that, when truly discovered, help us to see God in the world. They make God known to us – not just as a belief system – but as the one true God who inspires compassion, understanding, trust, healing, hope, justice, kindness, beauty, and meaning out of life. Amen.