

## **I Corinthians 12:1-11**

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho  
Pastor Tim Pauls  
One God, Many Gifts

The Word of the Lord from 1 Corinthians 12:4-6: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Corinthian Christians are converts in a happening town. Corinth is a big, cosmopolitan port city with all the big-city temptations of greed, lust and power. It's a hub of the ancient world and a center for sports. It's full of excitement, adventure and vice, all on a narrow strip of dirt joined to two bigger bodies of land; and thus when many arrive at Corinth, they cry out, "Isthmus be the place!"

Not surprisingly in such a place, there are a lot of different religions and a lot of different gods. Even for Christians, those idols are tempting; and even if those Christians don't want to renounce their faith, some of those old pagan behaviors are awfully seductive. But while all those gods have different teachings and rules and rites, they all have one important thing in common: they are all dumb. They're speechless, because they're all dead. They have nothing whatsoever to give. Their followers might believe that the idols are at work for a while as they enjoy pleasure, riches or a good harvest this time around; but these aren't gifts from those gods.

In stark contrast stands Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. In order to give salvation, He has become flesh and lived a perfect life, giving healing and help wherever He could. He has done so on the way to the cross, to die for the sins of the world. Risen again and having conquered death forever, He has gifts to give – gifts that no dead idol could ever supply. For starters, He gives forgiveness and eternal life to all who would believe in Him. And as a cause for even more joy, Jesus gives faith to believe in Him and receive His gifts. Our epistle for this day is, by the way, a great text to declare that faith is a gift from God – worked by the Holy Spirit, for it declares that "no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit."

By the work of the Holy Spirit, the Lord has a Church in Corinth, and He continues to visit them with His grace. He uses His people there as His instruments to take care of each other. And to take care of each other, He gives them many gifts.

This is important; and, in fact, I would suggest that this is the principal teaching of this text: there is one true God who gives many gifts to His people for their good. If we want to be as precise as our epistle, the one true, *triune* God gives many gifts to His people for their good. You've already heard Paul emphasize this once: "no one speaking in the *Spirit of God* ever says 'Jesus is accursed!'" But then He makes the Trinity more plain: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone." Along with those blessings of grace and salvation, faith and life, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are at work to supply you with all that you need.

The one true triune God gives many different gifts. He gives different gifts to different people; but as He gives them to different people, including you, they are to use them for the good of all. Here's how Paul describes God's generosity in the text:

For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of

healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.

It is quite a list of blessings that God gives, and guess what? This isn't an exhaustive list, as if God gives these and no more. This is a smattering, a sample. Not only that, but His gifts are so great that we can't even fully explain what these gifts in our text are!

For instance, "to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit. But what is the difference between the utterance of wisdom and the utterance of knowledge? Plenty of ink has been spilled to suggest what the difference might be, but all of that ink betrays the fact that Scripture doesn't make the distinction clear. "To another faith [is given] by the same Spirit;" but what is that faith? Clearly, it's not saving faith, because that's given to all Christians, not just some. "To another gifts of healings [are given] by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles;" in this case, the debate is one of time: the apostles were given the ability to heal and perform miracles, as were others in the New Testament. But the apostles are no more – is this also true for the ability to heal and work miracles that the apostles possessed? Likewise, "to another [is given the gift of] prophecy" – and yet the Lord has given us His Scriptures, and we are not to speak apart from His Word: so is that gift still given? There are three left: "to another [is given] the ability to distinguish between spirits." Does this mean a talent to test the spirits by God's Word, as we are instructed in 1 John 4:1, or does it mean something else entirely? And now, the final pair: "to another [is given] various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues." Does this refer to some sort of secret language between the individual and God, as many claim; or does it refer to the fact that some are talented at learning different languages of the world, and some possess the talent of interpreting those – which is also a great gift, and clearly Scriptural?

I am not trying to be obtuse by asking questions about each of these gifts, nor am I trying to make fun of them; these are gifts of God for our good. The best research I could find on this passage refused to commit to anything more specific than the questions I've raised – simply because the Lord doesn't define these gifts more specifically than this. We know that He gives them, but we can't precisely say what they are. The point is that He gives more than we can receive, and beyond what we can understand!

This is quite the contrast to American Christianity's attempts to reduce these down to a comprehensible, comprehensive list. I refer to an ongoing oddity called "spiritual gifts inventories," which become all the rage now and then, wherein you answer a bunch of multiple-choice questions to discover which gifts God has given you.

I have one in my office from twenty years back that says I(!) have the gift of healing because ... I prayed for someone and they got better. Isn't that a little presumptuous? Did the Lord need and use my prayer to heal someone? Could it be that He used doctors and medicines to get the job done? Could it be that my prayer was as effective, but no more so, than any other Christian's?

As a matter of curiosity, I took a new online inventory last night. As it turns out, I scored very well on "knowledge" and "teaching," because the survey questions revealed that I read my Bible a lot and I tell other people what it says, often when they're troubled. Does that mean that I have an extraordinary gift, or does it mean that ... that's my job?

Oddly enough, last night's test said that I lack faith; but then the test sort of defined faith as this belief that one is fearless and is never troubled, ever. I probably would have scored better there, but I – a real sinner – live in the real world.

Beyond the presumption of defining what God has not defined, and doing it badly, there's another danger. Those who seek to mobilize a congregation by pigeon-holing people with these inventories inevitably take the focus off of Jesus. In other words, instead of a Church that focuses on the Lord who gives, it becomes a congregation where each is focused upon his gift and what he can do with it. This was a problem among the Corinthians, as you'll hear in next week's epistle. And whenever the focus of the Church shifts from Christ's work to man's work, the Gospel is quickly ignored.

Remember the joyous news from before, what this text is really about: in contrast to false, dead idols, the triune God lives and gives all sorts of different gifts to all sorts of different people in order to take care of His people. Even if we cannot precisely define what each of those gifts is because their blessing goes beyond our understanding, we can still give thanks that God gives them; but woe to us if we seek to say more about them than He does, and then claim, "Thus says the Lord." Woe to us if we reduce them down to something we can comprehend, just so we can explain it away.

In the meantime, even if you cannot precisely label what gifts the Lord has entrusted to you, you can be sure that He has given you certain skills and talents by which you can serve those around you. Where you have opportunity, share the Word with others. Where you're handy, help fix things for those who aren't. Where you can cook, provide food for those who are in need or stricken with grief. You are who God has made you to be, and within your callings you can serve – whether we have a name for your particular gift or not.

And always rejoice in this: while we cannot precisely define all of the gifts that God gives us, He is quite specific about the gifts that matter most. Where we cannot exactly distinguish between the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge in our text, we do know that Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, as well as the wisdom of God and the power of God (1 Cor. 1:24), who was given to us for our salvation; and to know Him is to know the Father. Where we can't completely define this special gift of faith in our text, Jesus faithfully prayed "Thy will be done" to His Father and trusted His will all the way to the cross. Whether or not healings and miracles are still given to us to work today, Christ worked them as the Savior during His public ministry, still works miracles today as He pleases (not the least of which are faith and raising His people from the dead!), and He promises perfect healing when He raises you up to everlasting life. As to prophecy, He is prophet, as well as priest and king. As to discerning spirits, He has defeated Satan himself. As to tongues and the interpretation of tongues, He gathers His people out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Rev. 5:9). If you have Christ, you have all you need, for you have all of God's gifts in Him.

While the Lord leaves us less than clear on what gifts you and I might specifically possess for service to our fellow man, He is absolutely clear in this: Jesus is your Savior who has died on the cross to take away your sins, and is risen again. That same Savior sits at God's right hand, even as He visits you with forgiveness by His Word, by water and bread and wine. Made alive and so gifted in Him, you go and serve those around you with the gifts that you have, because you are certain of this: you are God's holy people, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen