1 Corinthians 12-14 *Wind and Fire: Pursuing the Holy Spirit*

***Getting Right To It***Today we are continuing in our series called *Wind and Fire*. It is what I planned to be 6 sermons on the nature and the work of the Holy Spirit. In the Bible, especially in the story of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was first poured out on the church, Wind and Fire are symbols of His presence.

And I don’t know if you have noticed or not, but in this series all of the sermon titles have started with the letter “P”. We’ve had a message called “The Person of the Holy Spirit,” “The Promise of the Holy Spirit,” “The Power of the Holy Spirit,” and “Praying by/in/with the Holy Spirit.” There’s no theological reason for this. There is nothing Biblical that connects the letter “P” to the Holy Spirit. It’s just that, as we were planning the themes, I noticed a lot of words that start with “P”, and so I decided to go for it.

When you alliterate like that, however, inevitably you have to stretch things a little bit. In a series of 6, there’s always going to be one where you have to reach for a word that fits that pattern. And that may be the case today.

Today, I want to talk about Spiritual Gifts. When you talk about the Holy Spirit, especially in the last few decades, you have to talk about His ministry of giving spiritual gifts to people. It’s probably one of the first things people think about when they think about the Holy Spirit, and it’s also one of the most controversial things.

And the passage in scripture which talks the most about spiritual gifts is 1 Corinthians chapters 12, 13, and 14. So that’s what we are going to look at today.

The problem, for me anyway, is that “gifts” doesn’t start with the letter “P”. I suppose I could have gone with the “presents” of the Holy Spirit, with a “T” instead of a “C”. Like Christmas presents. That’s a synonym for gifts. But the play on words seemed a little confusing. So instead, I went with the word “Pursuing” based on **1 Corinthians 12:31:**

**31**Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

Paul says that we should “eagerly desire” the gifts of the Spirit. As much as there can be controversy around this topic, we need to remember that we are talking about good gifts from God. The gifts are something to eagerly desire. Something to pursue.

This is a big topic, and there are three chapters of scripture that I want to cover; so we’ll get right into it. I don’t plan to comment on every verse, and we won’t even read them all, but I want to cover the big ideas here. So I have 8 points I want to make about Spiritual gifts that should help us work through the passage:

**1. God wants us to know about spiritual gifts**First, **God wants us to know about spiritual gifts**. Take a look at **1 Corinthians 12:1:**

Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.

That’s pretty straightforward! Paul needs to talk about gifts of the Spirit. Spiritual gifts.

The Greek word that gets translated as “gift” is ***charismata.*** That comes from the Greek word for “grace”, which is *charis*. It’s a word that simply means “gift.” A free gift. A grace gift. But you’ll recognize the basis of the word charismatic, which is a word used today to describe a whole subset of churches, which gives you a little idea of what we’ll be talking about.

Here’s a pretty good definition of Spiritual Gift, **from Wayne Grudem:**

A spiritual gift is any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church ([Systematic Theology](http://www.amazon.com/Systematic-Theology-Introduction-Biblical-Doctrine/dp/0310286700/ref=pd_bbs_sr_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1210527350&sr=8-2), pg. 1016).

John Piper gives a similar definition. **He says:**

A spiritual gift is an ability given by the Holy Spirit to express our faith effectively (in word or deed) for the strengthening of someone else’s faith. (<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/spiritual-gifts>)

The picture is this. The Holy Spirit gives these “gifts” (these abilities, empowered abilities) to believers so that they can minister to others within the church, the Body of Christ. “Used in any ministry of the church.” “For the strengthening of someone else’s faith.” Remember those phrases. We’ll be coming back to them.

Now, the Corinthians knew about spiritual gifts. They LOVED spiritual gifts! But maybe they loved them too much!

It’s always good to keep in mind that many of the New Testament books started out as letters. 1 Corinthians is a letter, written by the Apostle Paul, to a church in the Greek city of Corinth. And as a letter, it is written in response to questions and activities that we don’t know about, but which we can make guesses about based on what’s in the letter.

And one of the guesses we can make about the church in Corinth is that spiritual gifts were a big deal. They had the gifts of the Spirit, and they were practicing the gifts of the Spirit, and it was creating no small amount of confusion and controversy. So one of the reasons for Paul’s letter is to give some guidance on the use of spiritual gifts—to make sure they are not uninformed.

It would appear that the problem with the Corinthians was that they thought that because they had Spiritual Gifts operating within the church (some of them obviously and undeniably supernatural), that that proved that they were spiritual themselves! They thought that if they had splashy and powerful manifestations of the Spirit that meant they were mature and godly.

But they were mistaken. Our gifts do not determine our godliness! You can have very gifted people who are ungodly and immature. And you can have very godly people who only have very weak (or less obvious) gifts.

The two are not the same, and they should not be equated.

Gifts do not determine godliness. And just because there is a lot of obvious giftedness in a person’s life, that does not mean they are particularly godly or mature. In fact, sometimes it is the most gifted people who turn out to be the least prepared to handle it—which appears to be what was happening in Corinth.

**2. There are many gifts but one Spirit.**Point #2: **There are many gifts but one Spirit.** Here we will skip down to **verses 4-6:**

**4**There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. **5**There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. **6**There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

There’s a Trinitarian formula here. All three members of the Godhead: the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God at work.

And the point is: there are many different kinds of gifts, many different kinds of believers with a spectrum of talents and abilities and varying levels of spiritual empowerment, but it’s all the same Spirit. It’s not different spirits operating with different people, it’s all the same God who distributes the gifts as He sees fit.

Then, **starting in verse 8**, Paul gives a list of different gifts:

**8**To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, **9**to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, **10**to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.

This is one of 5 or 6 listings of spiritual gifts in scripture. Depending on how you count them, there are about two dozen named spiritual gifts in the Bible. None of the lists are exactly the same, however. Some gifts are mentioned in more than one list, but no gift is listed in all of them. That leads us to the conclusion, then, that these lists are meant to be representative (“for example” lists) rather than comprehensive. While the named gifts are a good place to start in figuring out what kinds of gifts the Spirit gives, we probably shouldn’t limit ourselves to just the named gifts.

The interesting thing about this list, in particular, is that it names what we might call the more supernatural gifts. Things like “healing” and “miraculous powers”. The list of gifts here are sometimes called the “sign” gifts or the “miraculous” gifts. Other lists include some of these gifts, but also include gifts that we might consider more “ordinary” like teaching and leadership.

And the point—both here in 1 Corinthians and elsewhere when gifts are talked about—is that all these gifts come from the Holy Spirit. Things like serving, encouraging, giving and showing mercy. They are just as much empowered by the Holy Spirit as the gift of prophecy or speaking in tongues. I think we can even conclude that other gifts that the Spirit uses to strengthen the faith of others—like the gift of music or the gift of empathy—are also spiritual gifts.

The are many gifts, but the same Spirit. **As verse 11 says**:

**11**All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

The Spirit determines how the gifts are distributed. It’s not up to us. It’s up to Him.

Now, that doesn’t mean that we can’t ask for a certain gift. It doesn’t mean that we can’t pursue or desire a different gift, but it does mean that we don’t determine what gift or gifts we have.  
  
The Spirit does.

**3. All spiritual gifts are given for the good of the church.**Third point: **All spiritual gifts are given for the good of the church.** Let’s back up to **verse 7:**

**7**Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

This is really important. Remember, I said you should hold on to those phrases: “used in any ministry of the church” and “for the strengthening of someone else’s faith.” I call this Paul’s bottom-line rule for the use of spiritual gifts. They are not for personal glory. They are not for show. They are not for burnishing your reputation. They are given for the common good. The Spirit gives us gifts so that we can build up others.

A lot has been made about the importance of figuring out what your spiritual gift is. There are online surveys you can fill out that will help you discover your gift. There are workshops that we have offered here at church. You can ask other people what they think your gifts are. That can all be helpful.

But maybe more important than being able to put a name to your gift is simply doing or saying things to help strengthen the faith of others. If you want to discover your gift, simply look for ways to help. John Piper writes this:

We must not get hung up on naming our gifts. The thing to get hung up on is, “Are we doing what we can do to strengthen the faith of the people around us?” <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/spiritual-gifts>

The ultimate use and purpose of spiritual gifts is to build up the body of Christ.

If you see a group of believers where their gifts are being used to make a name for someone (like we often see on television), then you know that those gifts are being used wrongly. The gifts are given for the common good.  
  
**4. The Body of Christ needs all of its parts to cooperate.**Fourth, **the Body of Christ needs all of its parts to cooperate.** Let’s move forward to **verses 14-16:**

**14**Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. **15**Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. **16**And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.

Here, Paul uses an extensive metaphor where He compares the church to the human body. The idea is that just as our various body parts perform different functions for the body--but all are needed to have the most able and capable body possible—so the Church of Christ is made up of different believers with different gifts from the Spirit and all are needed for the fellowship to be at its best.

The idea, then, is that certain parts of the body shouldn’t get overly prideful about the functions they perform for the body, somehow thinking that they can strike out on their own. Likewise, no part of the body should be made to feel unimportant or “less than” because their giftedness might not be as flashy or public.

The metaphor goes on for quite a few verses, and Paul paints a couple of ridiculous scenarios by imagining a human body that is just one giant eyeball or a head that is sitting there motionless because it told off the feet, but he is making a very serious point.

What Paul is saying is that we need each other. God gives many different gifts for the good of the church and He is very intentional about the way He does it. So everybody is necessary and vital to the healthy functioning of the body of Christ. We need each other.

If you don’t get anything else out of this week’s message walk away with this: We need each other.

The church needs you.

And you need the church.

God gave you a gift, the Spirit gives you gifts to be a blessing to others in the Body of Christ so that we can cooperate in making that body the healthiest it can be.

**5. The gifts will end when Christ returns.**Now, fifth point: **the gifts will end when Christ returns.**

So far, I’ve hinted that this sermon would be about the more so-called “charismatic” gifts. We’ve seen mention of miracles and prophecy and tongues, but I haven’t really gotten into the practice of these gifts.

One of the big questions that is debated is whether these gifts still truly exist today; or if God stopped giving those gifts at some point in the past. And Paul talks about how long the gifts will exist in chapter 13. **1 Corinthians 13:8-10:**

8Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears**.**

Paul clearly says that a time is coming (future for him, at least) when gifts like prophecy and tongues will no longer exist. They will cease. And there are some Christians—their position is known as cessationism—who say that time came when the Bible was written. The argument here is that the more miraculous signs were given to Jesus and the Apostles to help confirm their message; but once the Apostles had died and the Bible was written—that would be “completeness”, sometimes translated as “perfection”—once the Bible was written, these miraculous signs ceased. And if that is the case, then there would be no authentic examples of the gifts of prophecy or tongues today.

There are some very smart and very respected theologians who take this position. And honestly, I feel like I have the heart of a cessationist. My experience has not involved a lot of these more miraculous gifts; and what I have seen of their use—mostly on television or in eye-witness reports—has made me skeptical of their authenticity. But it is my goal to build my theology not just on my experience, but on the Word of God.

And in that sense, it is hard for me to see the writing of the Bible as being the time of completeness this passage is talking about. Rather, it seems to me the most natural reading of this text is that Paul is referring to the return of Jesus. He’s saying that for now, we have gifts like tongues and prophecy because we don’t have a complete picture of Jesus; but when Jesus returns, these sorts of gifts will no longer be necessary.

That especially seems to be the point when we look at **verse 12:**

**12**For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Seeing Jesus “face to face” sounds like something that will happen when Jesus returns. It seems to me that this passage is telling us that we can expect gifts like this up to and until the time of the Second Coming.

So while my experience has not involved a lot of these miraculous gifts; and while our church tradition does not practice a lot of these gifts; I do not think the Bible rules them out as a possibility. If the Spirit still wants to give gifts of healing and miracles and prophecy and tongues, that is His prerogative and we would be wrong to say it cannot happen.

**6. Some gifts have greater benefit to the church.**Which leads to point number 6: **some gifts have greater benefit to the church.**

Here’s where we really start to do some heavy-lifting, and this is why everything we have covered so far is important. Clearly, the 1 Corinthians had some confusion about the use of spiritual gifts. And, reading between the lines a little bit, they were especially fascinated by the miraculous gifts of speaking in tongues and prophecy. In that sense, their situation was similar to the controversy that divides some churches today.

And one of Paul’s points is that all of the gifts the Spirit gives are important; and no one should be looked down upon for having a lesser gift. That’s what the body metaphor is teaching. But at the same time—while every gift is important—some gifts are more useful to the church. Look at the **beginning of chapter 14:**

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy. **2**For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit. **3**But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.

Paul takes these two gifts and lays them out on the table to compare and contrast. Tongues and prophecy. Clearly, the Corinthians loved the gift of tongues. They were so impressed with their abilities to speak in tongues. They may have even made whether or not someone could speak in tongues a test of true faith; not unlike some churches do today.

Keep in mind that we are talking about something different than what happened at Pentecost. There, the believers were able to speak languages they never studied and people who spoke those languages were able to understand what was being said. What Paul is talking about here is something known today as *glossalia.* It is the ability to free a person’s tongue from their mind and vocalize sounds that do not correspond to any known language. It is something that is Spirit prompted, and it can be a way to express praise and delight in God; but it is also something the person has some control over.

And the important thing, especially from Paul’s perspective, is that while it can be helpful as a sort of private prayer language, no one else can understand what is being said, and in that way it is not helpful to others in the church.

Prophecy, meanwhile, is a Spirit prompted word of strengthening, encouragement or comfort. We’re not talking about telling the future here, or even of God revealing huge mysteries, but of the Spirit giving a person just the right things to say to strengthen, encourage, or comfort someone else.

So, guess which of these gifts Paul sees as being the more useful gift?

Remember Paul’s bottom-line rule for using spiritual gifts: what will be most helpful to the rest of the body of Christ. **Verses 4 and 5:**

**4**Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. **5**I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified.

Most of the rest of chapter 14 is Paul comparing the gifts of tongues and prophecy. He is consistent in his desire for others to speak in tongues, he mentions that he has frequently had the experience, but again and again he returns to his bottom-line: when with other believers, he wants us to use gifts that will edify the church.

Prophecy is the example he uses, and we should all pursue the gift of hearing words from God which will benefit others. But I think the larger principle here is to always seek to use gifts for building others up, not for our own private edification.

Which leads to a 7th point:  
  
**7. Spiritual gifts should be exercised in a fitting and orderly way.  
Spiritual gifts should be exercised in a fitting and orderly way.** Take a look at **verse 26:**

**26**What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.

The impression we get is that a worship service at Corinth was chaotic and noisy. It seems like there were probably people shouting in tongues, one louder than the next. It seems like there were people trying to outdo one another with prophetic utterances from God. Earlier, Paul said that if an unbeliever were to walk into one of their gatherings, that unbeliever would conclude that they were crazy people. (14:23)

Instead, Paul says that if people are going to speak in tongues, they should do so one at a time, and only if there is someone with the gift of interpretation. He says that if someone is going to stand up to share a prophetic utterance from the Lord, then it should be carefully considered by the rest of the church. Just because someone claims to have heard from God, that doesn’t have to be immediately accepted.

Basically, Paul is pleading for a little order. He says, in verse 33, that “God is not a God of disorder, but of peace.” And then, the whole section closes with **verse 40:**

**40**But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

Spiritual gifts are real. The Spirit has poured out many different gifts on His church as He sees fit. These gifts are for the building up of the church. Every gift is necessary for the health of the body. These gifts will be active until Christ comes again. We should desire and practice the gifts that have the greatest usefulness to the church. But in everything, there should be dignity and order.

**8. Gifts should always be exercised in love**Then, one more thing: **Gifts should always be exercised in love**. When chaos and controversy erupt over the use of gifts, we need to remember that love comes first.

It is not by accident that the Bible’s great love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, comes right in the middle of this extended discussion of spiritual gifts. **Here’s how it begins**:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. **2**If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing

Remember what I said at the beginning? Just because a person has gifts, that doesn’t necessarily mean that person is godly. Here’s Paul’s way of saying it. You can have the most amazing gifts—tongues, prophecy, knowledge, understanding, faith—but if you don’t have love you are a noisy bell and an empty shell.

We need to love. We need to use our gifts in love. If we don’t these gifts can look great, but they will be ultimately useless.

I love the way J.I. Packer said it. He would say: “Don’t pursue the gifts without the graces.” Don’t pursue all this power and show and the sorts of things that will draw attention to yourself, without also pursuing the grace to love people and care for people and truly serve in the love of Christ.

You probably know how the rest of 1 Corinthians 13 goes, it is read at nearly every wedding **you’ve ever attended**:

**4**Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. **5**It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. **6**Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. **7**It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

The greatest example of this kind of love is the Lord Jesus Christ. He truly loved the unlovable. He used His gifts in ministry. And then He died on the Cross to pay for our sins. When we trust in Him, when we look to Him, we see Love Incarnate, Love in the Flesh. And we know a love that is beyond knowing!

And that provides us with the ultimate example of how we should love others–especially His people, the Body of Christ.

The key to the healthy operation gifts within the Body is Christ-like love. He’s saved us for us to serve. He’s blessed us to be a blessing to someone today.