

What are Spiritual Gifts? A Series on Spiritual Gifts: Part 1

Perhaps because of their importance to the healthy function of the church body, there is frequent mention of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. While Paul lists spiritual gifts four times (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:8-10, 28; Eph 4:11) and Peter speaks of it only once (1 Pet 4:11), no list is identical and some gifts are mentioned more than once.

In Romans 12, Paul mentions a list to emphasize two things: a) the need for exercising gifts and b) exercising them in the right way.

Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly...
(Rom 12:6)

This diversity of spiritual gifts may illustrate the essential services needed for a successful and thriving church. And Paul reveals that all three Persons of the Trinity are the source and cause of the unity of spiritual gifts:

For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as **God** has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith;
(Rom 12:3-6)

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of **Christ's** gift. (Eph 4:7)

But to each one is given the manifestation of the **Spirit** for the common good. For to one is given the word of wisdom through the **Spirit**, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same **Spirit**; to another faith by the same **Spirit**, and to another gifts of healing by the one **Spirit**, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same **Spirit** works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as **He** wills. (1 Cor 12:7-11)

The English translation of "spiritual gifts" arises from the two different Greek terms used by Paul.

1. The Greek construction "tōn pneumatikōn" (1 Cor 12:1), understood in either neuter or masculine gender, can be translated as "spiritual things" or "spiritual persons." This means that it is difficult to distinguish between the gift and the person who has the gift.

This becomes apparent when comparing some of the lists. For example, Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 mention gifts as a type of service whereas 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11 mention gifts within the context of people.

Types of Service (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:8-10)	Gifts Within the Context of People (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11)
Prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, mercy, wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, distinguishing spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues	Apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists, pastors

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2. In listing the gifts, Paul used the Greek noun “charisma” (Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:4, 9, 28) which meant “gift given out of goodwill;” it was a term of benevolence that was used only in the context of God giving a gift to man not as a human being gifting another.

“Charisma” arises from the noun “charis” which Paul used more than any New Testament author. Paul used “charis” with the meaning of “grace” to represent God’s saving act through His Son Jesus Christ (i.e. Rom 3:24). Taken beyond the act of the pardon and legal acquittal of sin, Paul taught grace as encompassing the whole life of the Believer from beginning to end (Rom 5:2-5; John 1:16). In essence, the grace of God makes the new man what he is (1 Cor 15:10).

Whereas “charis” is seen as God’s grace extended in a general sense, “charisma” is the personal endowment of God’s grace.

Given that the term spiritual gifts is somewhat abstract, it may be helpful to draw some comparison to something familiar such as to natural talents.

1. Natural talents are similar to spiritual gifts in that they are endowed by God (1 Cor 4:7).
2. Just as individuals with natural talents display a range of prowess based on a variety of physiologic factors (i.e. nerve conduction, muscle cell type, etc), Christians are given spiritual gifts as God sees fit and in proportion to his faith.

Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; (Rom 12:6)

Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. (Acts 18:24-28)

But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. (1 Cor 12:11)

I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; (1 Cor 14:18)

3. There is the implication that spiritual gifts, like natural talents, can and should be developed.

Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. (1 Tim 4:14-15)

For this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline. (2 Tim 1:6-7)

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4. While one may lack a natural talent, a person will likely have the general ability of it (i.e. running). Somewhat similarly, while a particular spiritual gift may not be possessed, a Believer may be commanded to at least have the general ability!

Moses speaks of teaching:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. (Deut 6:5-7)

Jesus speaks of evangelism:

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matt 28:18-20)

5. Like those who may desire an admirable natural talent they lack, Paul encourages Christians to desire the greater spiritual gifts.

In this passage, Paul appears to suggest an ordered list of gifts and at the conclusion of this passage, Paul encourages Corinthian Believers to "desire the greater gifts" but that there is a more excellent way.

Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? **But earnestly desire the greater gifts.** And I show you a still more excellent way. (1 Cor 12:27-31)

Paul reveals that the more excellent way is the motive behind the expression of the spiritual gift. Regardless of the greatness of the gift, Corinthians 13 reveals that spiritual gifts are meaningless without the excellence of love. In this context of love for others, Paul explains what he means by the "greater gifts." The "greater gifts" are those that have the most impact in edifying the church.

Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries. But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the church. Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may receive edifying. (1 Cor 14:1-5)

Edifying and building up the church is what distinguishes spiritual gifts from natural talents. Paul places an emphasis on this, and Peter is more explicit in the motive of glorifying God "to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever."

So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek to abound for the edification of the church. (1 Cor 14:12)

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And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. (Eph 4:11-13)

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet 4:10-11)

The following is a chart listing the spiritual gifts found in Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28, Ephesians 4:11, and 1 Peter 4:11.

	1 Peter 4:11	
	“Whoever speaks”	“Whoever serves”
Romans 12:6-8	prophecy, teaching, exhortation	serving, giving, leading, mercy
1 Corinthians 12:8-10	prophecy, tongues, interpretation of tongues	wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, distinguishing spirits
1 Corinthians 12:28	apostles, prophets, teachers, tongues, interpretation of tongues	healing, helps, administration,
Ephesians 4:11	apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, pastors	

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