

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA

✠ Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost ✠

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Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

“Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, 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. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.”

(1 Corinthians 12:1-11 NIV)

The congregation at Corinth was a gifted congregation. And they knew it. They knew that they had spiritual gifts--especially gifts like speaking in tongues. They were proud of those gifts. And that, in part, was what led the Apostle Paul write this letter to the Corinthians. But in that letter he didn't deny the fact that they had these gifts. In fact, in the opening chapter Paul wrote, **“In him (Christ) you have been enriched in every way – in all your speaking and in all your knowledge”** and **“Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift.”** They had it all. They knew it all.

But – not exactly. They were missing something. And that led Paul to write in chapter twelve of his letter to them, **“Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant.”** That's Paul's way of saying, “I've got to tell you something about these gifts you have. I want you to know – I need you to know – that it is by God's grace that you are gifted in your speaking.” **By God's grace we are gifted to speak – to be able to confess a common faith, and to be able to use our various gifts for the common good.**

Paul begins his lesson with the Corinthians by following an age-old educational principle: He moves from the known to the unknown. He starts with what the Corinthians already knew. **“You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols.”** Before these people were Christians, they were pagans, many of them probably were idol worshippers. They looked to objects of wood or stone as their gods. But, Paul says, these gods couldn't talk. They were mute. Now that's an understatement. It wasn't like these were gods who were otherwise perfectly functional, but just hadn't developed the ability to talk yet. No, they were inanimate objects. They couldn't do anything. But you were led to follow them. You tried to please them even though they couldn't tell you what they wanted. You looked to them in time of need, but they couldn't give you any encouragement or comfort.

So Paul says, I need to tell you **“no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.”** It didn’t take long for the early Christians to come up with creeds that summarized what they believed. The phrase “Jesus is Lord” was apparently one of those creeds. If someone asked them, “What do you believe (about Jesus),” they would reply, “Jesus is Lord.” And already at this time many Christians were also persecuted. If someone was suspected of being a Christian and wanted to escape persecution, all he had to do was to curse Jesus. For they knew that no Christian would do that.

So Paul is saying that the difference between a pagan (which you were) and a Christian (which you are) comes from the Holy Spirit. You cannot change your spiritual vocabulary on your own. By nature you can only curse Jesus; not confess Jesus. The fact that you now confess Jesus as your Lord is because God the Holy Spirit has worked that ability in you. That’s a gift. It’s a gift of God’s grace that we call faith.

It’s a gift that has also been given to you. You demonstrated that when you stood and confessed that you “believe in one Lord Jesus Christ” who came down from heaven “for us and for our salvation” and who was crucified “for our sake” and rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.

What an amazing gift that is, especially considering your sinful nature. The sinful nature that is in each one of us, hates God. It would rather follow a piece of wood or stone and lead us away from God. Our sinful nature would much prefer to curse Jesus with our words or with our actions than to confess him and glorify him. And if we are honest with ourselves we will recognize and acknowledge that all too often we have done exactly that. It was for very good reason that you just sang the hymn: “Lord, to you I make confession; I have sinned and gone astray. I have multiplied transgression; chosen for myself my way. Led by you to see my errors; Lord, I tremble at your terrors.”

What an amazing gift, indeed, that God would change our cursing hearts and lips to confessing, believing hearts. This is the gift that Paul, above all, wanted his Corinthian brothers and sisters to remember. The privilege to confess a common faith is a gift of God’s grace. But there are even more gifts which they had. And they were to use those gifts for the common good.

This Corinthian congregation was indeed a gifted congregation. Paul lists quite a variety of different gifts that they had. **“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, 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. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.”**

That’s quite the gift list. But the list of givers is actually quite short. There is only one. God the Father, the Lord Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are one God who gives all these gifts. The gifts are not all the same, and not every one receives the same gifts. But all of the gifts come from God. And he determines – he plans who gets what.

Different people get different gifts. One person receives this gift; another person receives another. Some individuals might possibly receive more gifts than another. At different times in history, God may distribute more gifts than at another time. As we look at this list today, we see

that God may very well not be giving these exact gifts in exactly the same way as he did to the Christians in Corinth. There may also be gifts he gives to us that he did not give to them.

If God's gift plans for Corinth are not the same as his plan for us, what's the point of looking at this section of Paul's letter to the Corinthians? I believe there are several things we can learn from the way God gave gifts to them that are the same for us.

We already mentioned one of them, and perhaps the most important one. God gives the gifts. **"the same God works all of them in all men."** We also know that God gives gifts to all Christians. Two times in this section Paul writes that God gives gifts "to each one." All Christians have some gift.

And if God gives the gifts we can be sure that he will give the right gifts to the right people. That means that the gifts that you have are exactly the ones God wanted you to have. They were hand-picked, just for you. Not for the person sitting next to you, not for your coworker, not for anyone else, but just for you.

Isn't it nice when you get a gift that was exactly what you wanted or needed? You can just tell that the person who bought it really understands you and knew what you wanted. That's gift-giving at its best, isn't it. And God does that. He gives us exactly the right gifts for us.

On the other hand, we read that our gifts aren't really for us at all. **"Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good."** That means that you were given your gifts for the benefit of the person sitting next to you. You received your particular gifts for the good of someone else.

So God gives the gifts, to each Christian, for the good of others. But there's one more thing to notice in the section. Did you catch a common theme that ran through many of the gifts? Let me read the list again and see if you notice.

"To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, 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."

Many of the gifts that Paul describes for the Corinthians have to do with speaking, don't they? One speaks a message of wisdom or knowledge, another speaks prophecy, another speaks in tongues. God gave all these gifts to the Corinthians so that they would build each other up. They would build each other up primarily by speaking.

I think that if I were to take a poll of people here, I would get a good number who would say that they are not gifted at speaking. I wouldn't be surprised at that. I would say the same thing. Now if I were to poll a group of Bible History heroes like Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, and even the Apostle Paul, every one of them would probably say the same thing. I know that because they did say those things. As an example, in this very same letter, the apostle Paul told the Corinthians that he wasn't eloquent or persuasive with his words when he came to them.

But God gives Christians gifts of speaking to build each other up. He has even given them the words to speak. His gives us his Word to speak to one another. And so a Sunday School teacher tells a Bible story. A Christian friend listens and gives encouragement from the promises of God. A pastor speaks a word of comfort to a member on a sickbed. A dad speaks positively about the opportunity to come to worship and Bible study. A young child uses her voice to sing of God's love to whomever is around to hear.

You see, God gives gifts such as these so that we may tell of his grace. And we may not feel like we're particularly gifted. But by grace, God gives us the gifts. "If you cannot speak like angels, If you cannot preach like Paul, You can tell the love of Jesus; you can say he died for all." It may be as simple as that, or as simple as "Jesus is Lord." That is a gift of God's grace.

You are a gifted congregation. But that's no reason to congratulate ourselves and give ourselves a pat on the back. Spiritual gifts are gifts of God's grace. God has graciously given you the gift of faith. Rejoice that you are able to confess that faith-here in church or out in the world. God has graciously given you (each of you) some kind of gift to use for others. God's grace is active when those gifts are used to speak his Word to others. Use that gift to share the gift-the gift of God's grace.