

Eastwood Baptist (18/7/'18) **"NOW ABOUT SPIRITUAL GIFTS"** (1 Corinthians 12)

Introduction What do you think of when you hear the word "spiritual"? And what do you imagine other people think of? Spirituality is an important concept for Christians, but sometimes it's rather unclear, and sometimes it gets distorted. It seems that many of the Christians in Corinth had a distorted concept of spirituality. Many of them seem to have thought about spirituality in terms of superiority. "I am more spiritual than other people," they would have said. And, "I am a better Christian, who deserves more respect and more influence." They probably said such things for a variety of reasons, but one reason was that they believed that God had gifted them in ways which made them superior. And this is why Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 12.

"Jesus is Lord" (12:1-3) Look at how Paul begins this chapter – **read 12:1**. Paul welcomes their question about spiritual gifts – he doesn't want them to be ignorant, or confused. Some of the Corinthians are claiming to be more spiritual than others because of the important spiritual gifts which they have, and Paul is about to correct this attitude. This process of correction begins immediately – **read 12:2-3**. I think that Paul's reference to the pagan background of many of the Corinthians implies that they are carrying over pagan ways of thinking to their Christian lives. Paul tells them that the spiritual gifts are not about being impressive, or more spiritual than others. They are all about the Spirit of God, and about Jesus. Spiritual gifts are not to be used however an individual Christian desires, and certainly not for self-glorification. They are to be used in line with the leading of the Holy Spirit, and to glorify Jesus as Lord. It was particularly necessary for people who had until recently been pagans to receive this teaching, but it is still relevant to us.

"The same God works" (12:4-7) Paul develops this point in the next few verses. Having named the Spirit and Jesus, he now links spiritual gifts with all three members of the Trinity – **read 12:4-6**. It is the triune God who works through the gifts, so gifted Christians need to remember this and need to seek to please God by the way they use their gifts. Less obviously, Paul also makes a point by his choice of two words to place in parallel with the word "gift", namely "service" and "working". Paul is saying that spiritual gifts are not for display, but for working and serving. And who is to be served? On the basis of vv.4-6, we might say "God". And this would not be wrong. But Paul gives a different, although related, answer. **Read 12:7**. We are to serve God by serving one another. This is why God gives us spiritual gifts.

Some of the Gifts (12:8-11) Paul now gives a list of some of the spiritual gifts. Clearly it is "some", not "all", since there are gifts which are not mentioned here, but are named later in the chapter. So why these particular gifts at this point? I think Paul begins with gifts which were prized by the Corinthians. It is clear that the Corinthians prized wisdom and impressive speaking, and several of these gifts are related to speech and wisdom. It also seems likely that they prized the more spectacular gifts, and they appear here. Paul is confirming that such gifts are indeed among those which God gives, but he is offering a new perspective on these gifts. He has already stated in v.7 that they are not for the glory of those to whom they are given, but for the common good. A further pointer to the right perspective on the gifts follows Paul's list – **read 12:11**. They have a common origin, so they should be used in

ways which promote unity. Incidentally, not all of these gifts can be defined with precision. If we remember that Paul's list is not exhaustive, but exemplary, then precise identification is not essential. What is essential is that we value whatever spiritual gifts God gives. And therefore use them to help one another, which will please and glorify God.

“No division in the body” (12:12-27) Paul now uses the well-known analogy of the human body. He uses it to shift the focus of the Corinthians away from individuals and parties and onto the church as a whole. The analogy is easy to understand, and powerful. Beyond this general message, Paul makes a point by highlighting both those parts of the body which we would normally consider especially important and those which we would normally consider less important. He first approaches this comparison from the point of view of the supposedly less important parts. **Read 12:15-17.** I think that Paul is saying both that those who have only what the Corinthians consider lesser gifts should not imagine that they are unimportant, and that those who have more admired gifts should not despise these others. Then Paul approaches this from the other side – **read 12:21.** Those who have the more admired gifts shouldn't imagine that they don't need anyone else. In between we have the statement which applies in both directions – **read 12:18-20.** Then, as Paul says, there will be “no division in the body”.

A Healthy Variety of Gifts (12:28-31) As Paul comes to the end of the chapter, he provides a second list of spiritual gifts (v.28). This list begins with three kinds of persons who are God's gift to the churches, numbered from first to third. Paul seems to be saying, “If you want to accord prominence to anyone, then accord it to those whom God uses to bring churches into being and to play key roles in building them up. Then Paul turns again to listing actual gifts, not in any particular order. Some of these gifts were in Paul's earlier list, but he adds two new ones: literally, “helps” and “administrations”. I think that these may mean gifts exercised in helping and gifts exercised in leadership. Certainly it is significant that Paul places unspectacular gifts alongside spectacular ones, and gifts whose names don't mention speech alongside gifts of speech and wisdom. All the gifts are valuable. None are to be overlooked, and none are to be the cause of elevating those who have them to positions of excessive honour. After the list, Paul emphatically declares that none of the gifts is for everyone. **Read 12:29-30.** Therefore we should not demand any particular gift for ourselves, nor tell others that they must have a particular gift. This includes the gift of speaking in tongues. Finally, in v.31, Paul bridges into what he wants to talk about next. Remember that there were originally no chapter or verse divisions. The first part of v.31 could be either an exhortation or a statement. Paul may be urging them to desire eagerly what he calls “the greater gifts”. If so, I think that he means the gifts which contribute most immediately to building up the church. And, in the light of what he has already said, I think that it makes better sense that he wants them to desire these gifts for the church rather than for themselves individually. Or Paul may be stating that they do, in fact, desire what they consider the greater gifts. In which case, he says this before urging them to desire to do what is open to every Christian, to desire to show love. Certainly the last words of v.31 – “and now I will show you the most excellent way” - lead into the chapter about love. So let us use the spiritual gifts which God has given us, and let us be grateful for the gifts which he has given other people. And, above all, let us serve God by loving one another.