

Gifts from the Spirit (Pt. 3)

Alright, good to see you guys. If you have a bible, turn with me to 1 Corinthians 12. If you're new, we are on the *final Sunday* in a series all about the Holy Spirit, and we're wrapping it up by taking three weeks to look at the "gifts" from the Spirit, or what you may have heard people call "spiritual gifts." And we've sort broken them up into three categories. Two weeks ago, we looked at what we've called the *prophetic* gifts: prophecy, words of wisdom, words of knowledge, and something called distinguishing between spirits. Then *last* week, and we actually jumped over to Romans 12 to look at what we called the "practical" gifts: serving, leadership, generosity, mercy, and the like. So if you missed either of those weeks, definitely go back and grab those teachings on the podcast at some point. Otherwise, you're going to be very confused as to why we're only covering a handful of the gifts this morning and completely ignoring others. But it's because we've already covered them.

But to close things out this morning, we're jumping *back* into 1 Corinthians 12. So let's first read our passage—the same one we looked at two weeks ago—just to get our bearings a little. Look with me at 1 Corinthians 12, starting in v. 7:

*[7] To each is given the **manifestation** of the Spirit for the **common good**. [8] For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, [9] to another **faith** by the same Spirit, to another **gifts of healing** by the one Spirit, [10] 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**. [11] All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.*

So today, we're covering what we've been calling the "miraculous" gifts, which includes the following: *faith, gifts of healing, the working of miracles, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues*. Now, three quick disclaimers. First, a disclaimer on that term "miraculous": when I call those gifts "miraculous," I'm not trying to say that the other gifts *aren't* miraculous. I think we can all agree that anything that the Spirit of God does through human beings is miraculous on some level, amen? But I've called these gifts *today* "miraculous" simply because they often *appear* more miraculous to us on the surface. Does that make sense? So I'm not in love with that label, but I also didn't have a better one, so it'll have to suffice for today.

Second disclaimer: there *are* people in the church today who would say there's no *reason* to talk in-depth about these types of gifts because *they* would say that these gifts don't occur anymore. The theological term for that perspective is *cessationism*. As in the belief that these gifts have "ceased." And while we won't really be coming from that perspective this morning, I think there are *plenty* of *faithful* followers of Jesus who come from that perspective. We have plenty of people who are a part of *our church currently* that come from that perspective, and that's okay—this is very much something we can agree to disagree on.

But I think that's probably a *smaller* portion of our church family. I think even more of us in the room today are what we might call *functional* cessationists. So a lot more of us probably wouldn't outright *say* we don't believe the miraculous happens anymore, but at a functional level we don't really expect him to. We don't interact with God and ask him for things like he does this stuff anymore. But here's what I've noticed. **If you can get all the way to the bottom of *both* types of cessationism—*functional* and *explicit*—you'll find a belief that goes something like this: "we don't see these things happen very much today, and so they must *not* happen anymore."**

If *that's* your line of thinking, here's what I would offer us if that's where we're at: ***do not assume that just because something isn't your experience, that it isn't valid and true and beautiful.*** Okay? Don't make that jump. I'd encourage you not to approach the gifts that way. Partly because *in general*, that's just not a great way to *read the bible*. Anytime we find ourselves going "this is my *experience*, and therefore here is what Scripture *must* say or mean," we are in a really dangerous place. Because **we don't read our experiences into the bible, we let the bible inform and enlighten and speak *into* our experiences.** Does that make sense? So specifically when it comes to the more *miraculous gifts* we're discussing today, let's be willing to consider if there are valid and even *beautiful* things that are outside of our current life experience. That's what I have and still do fight to do, and I want to ask that you'd do that with me today. That fair?

And the last disclaimer: if you are brand new, just here checking things out for the first time, you've picked quite the Sunday to join us for the first time. I know that there's a very good chance this is all gonna seem very weird to you. I promise things aren't always quite this weird. We're always a *little* weird, but not always *this* weird. But just know that it's actually weird to a lot of us too. A lot of us are actually trying to grow in our understanding of all these things, so if you are overwhelmed, just know you're not the

only one. So if you can, hang in there with us this Sunday, and maybe just give us one more week before you decide to never come back ever again. Fair enough?

Okay, now that we have all three disclaimers out of the way, let's hop in. We'll kick things off with gifts of healing.

Healing

The one I wanted to start with, because it's probably the one people most *associate* with the Holy Spirit in many church traditions—is the gift of *healing*. Paul says that the Spirit manifests himself to some through gifts of healing. Now, if there's one thing we can gather from the *life of Jesus*, it's that **healing is a really broad category**. In other words, Jesus heals people of anything and everything. Major illnesses and minor ones. Lifelong conditions and temporary bugs. He heals people who are *near death*—like currently on their death bed, and then, on the other hand, people like Peter's mother-in-law, who is suffering from—and I'm quoting here—"a high fever."¹ So apparently, one day, Jesus and Peter were hanging out, and Peter said "you know, my mother in law is a little under the weather today Jesus—you wanna see what we can do about that?" Speech impediments, disabilities—you name it. And what's more is that Jesus didn't just heal people *physically*. He also heals people *spiritually* and *emotionally* and *psychologically*. The healing that the Spirit brings is a *holistic* type of healing, in the truest sense of the word. Anyway, my point is that **apparently no condition is big, or too small for Jesus to bring healing and restoration to. Amen?**

Now, when it comes to how *followers* of Jesus tend to think about healing, I think we tend to fall into one of two camps. **One camp functionally operates as if Jesus should heal everybody of everything, right here and right now.** That every single person should experience healing *today*. And often, when they pray over that person and they *aren't* healed, this leads them to conclude that something is wrong with the *person* seeking healing. Something that *prohibited* the healing from happening. That that person didn't *believe* enough, or have enough *faith*, or they have some hidden *secret sin* that is preventing them from being healed. That something is wrong with *that person*, that prevented them being healed.

The problem with that is that there are *plenty* of times in the bible that don't really fit in that framework. As just one example, the apostle Paul; when he prays for God to take away some type of physical ailment he's experiencing, God responds by saying "no, but

¹ Matthew 8:14-15

my grace is sufficient for you.”² Not “well Paul, I’m not going to heal you because you don’t have enough faith.” Not “Paul, I *would* heal you, but you still have this hidden secret sin that you aren’t confessing.” Simply, “no, not right now.” The bible’s perspective is that **we currently live in a world where not everybody gets healed all the time**. As followers of Jesus, we know that while God will heal all of us *one day in the future*, that day isn’t *today*. And that’s okay. God has given us enough grace for *today*, to live in that world.

But the *other* camp followers of Jesus fall in when it comes to healing—and if I had to guess, this one is the bigger danger for more of us at *our church*—is the camp that operates as if healing *never happens* in the here and now. This is the camp that will pray for people to “suffer well” or for them to “endure,” but won’t ever pray for healing—at least not with any real expectation that it will happen. And I want us to see that this camp is just as off-base as the other one. Because it operates off the assumption that God doesn’t *desire* to heal, which is very contrary to what the life of Jesus would demonstrate. Or, it assumes that it is somehow more spiritual for a person to suffer from sickness or illness than it is for the Holy Spirit to heal them. And that’s not true at all.

So here’s what I think we *should* push for, rather than *either* of those camps: **let’s operate as if God *desires* to heal, as if he has the *ability* to heal in the here and now—and at the same time be prepared for there to be *occasions* where he *doesn’t***. And know that it’s not necessarily anybody’s *fault* that he doesn’t. Let’s pray, and expect, and hope as if God heals people today just like he always has, even while acknowledging that that won’t happen 100% of the time, and that his grace will be enough to sustain us, just like it did for Paul, when it doesn’t. So when someone is sick or suffering from some type of illness or injury, you know what I think we should do? I personally think we should pray for God to heal them every single time. Not because God is obligated to, not because it’s his job to heal every single person in the here and now, but simply because that’s what Jesus did. And here in 1 Corinthians, Paul is suggesting that he may work through some of *us* to accomplish just that in exceptional ways.

Working of Miracles

Second, Paul brings up miracles. So while any type of *healing* is a miracle, there are also types of miracles that *aren’t* healing-related. In Jesus’ life, these were things like calming a storm, walking on water, turning water into wine—or if you grew up in a church

² 2 Corinthians 12:9

tradition like I did, the story where Jesus unfortunately turned water into *sin*. **Jesus regularly did those types of *miraculous* things—sometimes called “signs” in the bible—to demonstrate to people who he was and the type of authority he walked in.**

Now I would argue that the Spirit still does things like this through people today. I have a friend who has served as a missionary in a number of foreign countries. He told me a story about one time he and a couple locals were essentially smuggling bibles into a “closed” country. That was one of the only ways to get the people they were reaching a copy of the Bible in their own language. But at the same time, they knew that if the border authorities in this country saw the bibles in their vehicle, they would confiscate the bibles and arrest *them*. So they loaded up their vehicle with a trunk full of bibles, and made their way to the border.

And as they approached the checkpoint, they all prayed a simple prayer: they said “God, we know that you can make the blind see, and so in this moment we pray that you would make those who can *see*, *blind*. That you would blind the eyes of the border authorities, so they can’t see the bibles.” So they pulled up to the checkpoint, and they were all asked to get out of the car. And they stood there and watched as the border patrol officers looked through everything in their car, including the trunk. When they got to the trunk, the officers were literally moving bibles out of the way to try and find bibles. They found nothing, so they let my friend and the people with him go on through unimpeded. So it could be that none of those border patrol agents could read, and couldn’t see the word “Bible” clearly spelled out on the cover of dozens of bibles. Or, it could be that God miraculously blinded their eyes so that my friend could smuggle in these bibles.

So God still does the miraculous today. I’m sure some of you in the room today have examples of God accomplishing the miraculous. Eric, who was up here last week, has plenty of stories about examples of it he’s seen. Madison, who is a part of my LifeGroup, has first-hand examples of it from her life. God still does this—he still uses the miraculous for his purposes. And he sometimes gives people the ability to be a conduit *for* that to happen.

Faith

Next, Paul lists out “faith.” Now, this isn’t referring to the type of faith that makes you a follower of Jesus in the *first place*—all followers of Jesus have *that* type of faith. This is referring to a *supernatural* level of faith that *not* every follower of Jesus has. So have you ever come across another follower of Jesus that just seems like they have a “direct line”

to God? So I don't know about you, but in my life, when I pray for things, I feel like I bat about .200. I feel like the things I pray for happen *maybe* 20% of the time. But then I've got friends who, when *they* pray, it at least *seems like* some version of what they asked for happens almost every single time. Anybody have friends like that? Aren't those people so annoying? No I'm kidding...mostly. And usually, these people are extremely confident in what they ask as well. Not cocky, not arrogant, but just this surreal confidence that God is capable of doing what they ask, and *will* do what they ask. I think a lot of those people very well could have this gift of faith.

Now the point that Paul is making in 1 Corinthians is that **a person with that gift of faith, doesn't just have that gift for *themselves*, but also for the benefit of *others*.** So there are a number of times in the gospels where Jesus heals or helps *one person*, because of *another* person's faith. There's a story about a man who is paralyzed, but his friends bring him somewhere that Jesus is teaching, and lower him down through a *hole in the roof* to Jesus, because they're *that confident* that Jesus can heal him. And the way Mark records this story, it says that "Jesus saw *their faith*," (the *friends'* faith) and as a result, heals the *paralyzed man*. So in that story, it's not the *paralyzed man's* faith that heals him—it's his *friends'* faith on his behalf.³ Does that make sense?

There's another story, where Jesus is interacting with a Roman soldier, who has a servant living in his house who is sick. When some people ask Jesus to go to the soldier's house and heal this servant, the Roman soldier says to Jesus, "no, you don't even have to come to my house and do it—I'm not worthy of that. If you just give the word from a distance, I *know* that my servant will be healed." And Jesus responds by marveling at the guy's faith, saying, "I haven't found *faith* like this in all of Israel." So in that story, God heals the *servant* because of the *Roman soldier's* faith.⁴

So there are times, when God gives people the ability to have faith *on behalf of another person, for that person's benefit.* Does that make sense? So it may be that when we pray for someone to be healed, or when we pray for something miraculous to happen in someone's life, we also need someone else there who can believe and trust God on that person's behalf. I think a really cool *microcosm* of this is how sometimes, on Sundays, when we're about to sing a song about God's goodness or about God's faithfulness to us, sometimes we'll preface it with something like, "hey, I know some of us are in a place where it's really hard for us to sing these words right now. So if you're in a place where you feel like you *can't* sing it, feel free to let other people here sing it over

³ Mark 2:1-12

⁴ Luke 7:1-10

you. And if you're in a place where you *can* sing it, don't just sing it for *yourself*—sing it for the people in this room that need so desperately to hear it.” That’s a way of us saying, “let your faith stand in the gap for somebody else here today.” And that’s why we need people with the gift of faith. That’s the type of thing we mean when we talk about faith.

Okay, do you guys have one more left in you before we zoom out for a bit? *Maybe?* Good, because I saved the best for last. And by “best,” I mean “most confusing.” Let’s talk about tongues and the interpretation of tongues.

Tongues & the Interpretation of Tongues

I’ve grouped these two together since they kind of go hand-in-hand. So Paul also mentions something he calls “tongues.” “Tongues” in the bible is just another word for “languages.” **When Paul talks about people speaking in “tongues,” what he’s referring to is people having the miraculous ability, in the power of the Spirit, to speak in a language they haven’t learned.**

Originally in the bible, this referred to people talking in actual *foreign languages* that other people knew. It has some of its roots in the story of Pentecost.⁵ If you don’t know the story, Pentecost was this huge annual festival where people from all over the ancient world came together in one place for a giant celebration. And one year, *at* that celebration, God wants to make himself known to the people there at the festival; he wants his disciples to proclaim who he is to people there for Pentecost. The only *problem* with that is that all the people there spoke in different languages and dialects. So what God does is *miraculously enable* those followers of Jesus there to speak in languages that they hadn’t spent any time learning. And as a result of all this, it says about three thousand people get baptized and begin to follow Jesus.

So it would be sort of like if, during the 1982 World’s Fair here in Knoxville, where there were people from all over the world that spoke dozens of different languages, God gave a few people from City Church the sudden ability to speak to those people about Jesus in French and Spanish and German, even though none of us had spent any time *learning* those languages (with no Google Translate involved whatsoever). And then as a result, all those people decide to follow Jesus and we just walked down to the Tennessee River and dunked them all, baptize them, and they started following Jesus. Which honestly sounds kind of awesome. But that was the *original* purpose of *tongues* in

⁵ You can read this story in Acts 2.

the bible. It's the Spirit giving people the spontaneous ability to speak in actual human languages that they've never learned.

Now, some people would say that there is *another* type of tongues, where the Spirit gives the ability to speak in entirely *unknown* languages—so not French or Spanish or German but an altogether different language that *nobody* knows except for the person speaking it and God. And plenty of people would say they have the ability to speak in *that* type of tongue.

Now as far as we can tell, Paul in 1 Corinthians is totally cool with that as well. The only qualifications it gives is if people decide to speak in those types of tongues *publicly*, in front of other people. Paul says if you want to speak in this *unknown* type of tongue in a public setting, where other people can hear it, you just need to have someone translate, or *interpret*, what you're saying, so that other people can understand it. Because remember, as we've been saying the past two weeks: our gifts are intended to *benefit others*. But if you are expressing your gift of tongues, and no one around you has a clue what you're saying, that can't *help* them in any practical way. And so 1 Corinthians says if you don't have someone to interpret it, you should just keep it at a volume that only you and God can hear.⁶ But if someone *interprets* what you say in that tongue, it potentially *can* help others. And God evidently gifts people at times with the *supernatural* ability to do that. Simple enough, right? (Some of you are like “literally nothing you are saying today is simple.” You're not wrong.)

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But with that, in the last three weeks, we've worked our way through *all the gifts* in Romans 12 and in 1 Corinthians 12. You guys really did it—I'm proud of each and every one of you. So at *this* point in the teaching, the last two weeks, we've spent the rest of our time answering the question, *how do I know if I have one of these gifts, or if God wants to accomplish them through me?* And each week, we've given you some ways to figure that out.

But since we've already done that *twice*, today I wanted to answer the *other* burning question that is likely on a lot of our minds. And that question goes something like this: *if these things still happen, how come most of us don't see them happen very often?* That's what a lot of us are wondering, right? *If these things happened through Jesus, and if they happened through the early followers of Jesus, and if we're saying they still happen today (which we are), why don't the bulk of us get to see them happen on a*

⁶ The clearest place Paul gives this instruction is in 1 Corinthians 14:27-28.

regular basis? That's a question an awful lot of us have, is it not? And full disclosure, I don't think we get any *one* clear *answer* to that in the bible. But I do think we can offer some informed *responses* to that question, based on some of the *patterns* we see in Scripture. So let me give you just two *responses* to *why doesn't it seem like the miraculous happens much today?*

Response #1: It *does* happen, more than we realize.

The truth is the miraculous *is* happening right now, as we speak. Much of it happening in churches and in places that you and I have never been. And I'll just add this: *plenty* of it happens far away from video cameras and news outlets and people's Insta-stories. In fact, I would argue **it would be very *Jesus-like* to do the miraculous primarily in places where it won't be shared and retweeted and talked about by hundreds of people as a result.** Even in his time *on earth*, Jesus often, after healing someone or performing a miracle, would tell that person not to tell anybody about it.⁷ Jesus often didn't try to go viral with his miracles (except for one: the resurrection. We'll talk about that more in a second). But again, **we probably shouldn't assume that because we've never seen it, it doesn't happen.**

Plus, it's worth noting that in the bible, the miraculous often occurred in places where the message of Jesus *hadn't taken root yet*. It's why a lot of miracles happen in the gospels and the book of Acts. It seems like as a pattern, God uses the miraculous to help *validate* the message of Jesus when it comes to a place or a people group for the *first time*. So if you think about it, that might explain why today, the miraculous occurs *more often* in unreached people groups and developing nations—places like that. In places where very few people are even aware of Jesus. In fact, if you *know people* who have served in those types of contexts overseas, you know that generally, *they* have very little problem believing in the miraculous, because they see it on a very regular basis. So **it's possible that while the miraculous still happens here in *our* context, it very well happen *more often* in places that are more unreached with the message of Jesus.** And second...

Response #2: Because of a lack of faith.

It's possible that sometimes, the miraculous doesn't occur as much in our context because of a lack of faith. Now, in case you're wondering: I haven't forgotten what I just said earlier: Jesus *never refuses* to heal someone or perform a miracle for someone

⁷ Matthew 8:1-4; Mark 1:34; Mark 1:40-44; Mark 7:31-36.

because *that person* doesn't have enough faith. You won't find a single story of that in the bible. Jesus never encounters someone wanting healing, and goes "ooh, I'm sorry little girl—you only have 20% faith and I'm looking for more like an 80-90%. Come back tomorrow and do better." Never happens. In fact, Jesus often does the miraculous specifically *in spite of* a lack of faith on their part.⁸ So I'm still hanging my hat on that point. But that being said, we still have passages like Matthew 13:58, where it says "Jesus did not do many miracles there because of their *lack of faith*." So what in the world does *that* mean?

Here's what I think he means: **Jesus often doesn't do miracles for people who won't be convinced by miracles.** So when Jesus knows that the miraculous will serve to *build* up people's faith, when it will help the gospel take root in their hearts, he often does the miraculous. But when he knows that a miracle ultimately *won't* accomplish that—when the people asking for the miraculous are so cynical and skeptical that he knows the miraculous won't convince them of anything, he often *doesn't* do miracles. **He sometimes doesn't do miracles for those who refuse to be convinced by them.**

And I wonder if that's the case for some of us in *our* society today. In a deeply rational, skeptical, increasingly *cynical* society like 21st century America, I wonder if we don't see the miraculous as often because God knows the miraculous actually won't make us believe. And when I say we're cynical, I don't just mean people *outside* the church—I mean *us*. I mean *me*. I think about how slow I am to pray about things and how quick I am to think I can handle it myself. I think about even my own *skepticism* even when I *do* pray; nearly every time I pray for someone to be healed, even if they begin to experience healing almost *immediately*, do you know what my gut response often is? "Well, they were probably going to get better anyway." Someone undergoes intense, life-and-death type of surgery, and I pray like *crazy* for it, and then it goes well and I think, "well, I'm glad they had a really good doctor." I think of times I've seen God provide for me and others in inexplicable, miraculous ways, and my initial reaction is "well I'm sure there's some logical explanation for how that happened." I mean, am I alone in that? Have any of you ever thought things like that? Do you see how *deep* the skepticism goes in us? Do you see how resistant we can be at times to believing in the miraculous? I mean, yeah, it could be that all of those situations are explainable without the miraculous. But to be sure there are times where that person *wasn't* going to get better anyway, and it *wasn't* the doctor, and *there isn't* another explanation—it was God at work. So **it might be that**

⁸ For just a couple examples, see Mark 4:36-41 and Matthew 14:22-36.

we don't see the miraculous, because for some of us, the miraculous wouldn't actually convince us.

I want to show you just one example of this happening in the Scriptures, and we'll land here. Take a look on the screen at Matthew 12:38-40 where Jesus encounters some religious leaders who are skeptical of who he is:

[38] Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from you."

In other words: "Jesus, do a miraculous *something* for us to prove that you are who you say you are. If you do that, we'll believe in you." But then Jesus responds, v. 39:

[39] He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! [well that took a turn, right?] But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. [40] For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Now, I know Jesus' language reads a bit cryptic here. But the *gist* of what Jesus is saying is simply this: "you're asking for a miraculous sign, and I'm not going to give you one, because *that is not what you need*. That's not what's going to convince you. What I *will* give you is my *own* death and resurrection. I'll give you my body and blood, shed on the cross. I'll give you my death, and my resurrection from the dead. I'll give you a risen Savior who comes to you and says "forsake your sin, and trust in me." And if you won't believe a resurrected Jesus calling you to that, a healing or a miracle or a tongue isn't going to do it either.

You see, as powerful and as incredible and as desirable as the miraculous gifts are, they are not the *point*. They're not the point of following Jesus. In the life and ministry of Jesus, they were always a means to an *end*. And the end is salvation-generating, life-giving faith. So the miraculous gifts are an important thing, but they are not the *main* thing. The main thing is a relationship with the living God through Jesus. And I think **God is well aware that sometimes miraculous signs help people get there, and sometimes they don't.**

So for us sitting here this morning, let's believe in and even pursue the *miraculous* gifts from the Spirit. I mean that. Let's believe that God does it and that he wants to do it. But

in the midst of that pursuit, **let's be sure *important things* don't become the *most important* thing.** Because **the *most important* thing is the good news of Jesus: that the all-powerful God, the God of miracles and signs and wonders, put on flesh and blood and walked this earth among us.** And as he did that, yes he did miracles. Yes, he healed people. Yes, he marveled at people's faith. But more than anything, you know what he did? He *loved people*. He saw to the depth of their needs, physical, emotional, psychological, and *spiritual*—and he *loved* them in the midst of them. And ultimately, he loved them all the way to the *cross*, where offered up his very life as a sacrifice for them. I think just like the people in Matthew 12, for all the signs and wonders that we may *think* we need, *that* is the only one we *truly* need. And that is one that is made available to every single one of us through Jesus.

As a church, I want to see us pursue the miraculous gifts. I want us to see *healings* in our midst. I want us to see God do *miraculous things* to be sure. Yes and amen to all of that. I want to see all of that, because it's in this book, and I believe he is just as capable of doing that today as he was back then. But that's not *the* thing I want our church to be about—it's just *one* thing. *The thing* I want our church to be about is the good news of Jesus—that he died for us, rose for us, and gave us his Spirit to demonstrate his power in a *variety of ways, including* the miraculous. Does that make sense?

Okay, let's pray together.