

Holy Spirit and You

Advance in Faith 1 — Unit 3 Week 5 — Holy Spirit's gifts (2)



Introduction

Last session we began discussing the gifts of the Spirit listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10. The reason Holy Spirit provides these gifts is not so we can feel more spiritual than other people but so that we can function as Jesus-in-the-world (his body).

We saw how he helps us to:

- 1) find a way when there seems to be none (wisdom)
- 2) know what we need to know to help each other (knowledge)
- 3) trust God for a specific change (faith)
- 4) bring healing as a sign that God is setting things right (healing)
- 5) declare what God will do to reveal himself (miracles)

Tonight we continue exploring these further examples:

- 6) prophecy
- 7) distinguishing spirits
- 8) tongues
- 9) interpretation

Example 6: Prophecy

Prophecy means hearing what God is saying (or seeing what God is doing), **and declaring it**. The central idea is the God is our sovereign, the one who rules the earth. As our ruler, what he says goes. He decides what he wants done. But he doesn't do it all himself: from the very beginning, his plan was always to carry out his management of creation through his children. We were designed for this.

God is an amazing kind of ruler. He doesn't micro-manage the world. He places much genuine responsibility in our hands. He is thrilled when we share his values and desire to help those who cannot help themselves. In Old Testament times, the widows, orphans, and foreigners owned no land among Israel, so they were the ones who were in danger of going hungry and becoming oppressed by those who held power.

That's why God would regularly send prophets who declared to Israel what their heavenly sovereign wanted them to do:

Jeremiah 22:3 (NIV) This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.

The prophets heard what God was saying, and delivered the message to the people. If the people disobeyed, they would experience trouble (judgement/chastisement); if they obeyed, they would experience God's blessing (restoration/salvation). The prophet reminded the people that **their future depended on how they responded to their heavenly ruler.**

But **prophecy is not prediction**: what happened next was conditional: it depended on how they responded to the message God sent:

Jeremiah 18 ⁷ If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed,
⁸ and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.
⁹ And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

The prophet Joel announced that God would bring a great army of locusts to devour the crops throughout the land of Judah because of the people's disobedience. They would be decimated. In fact, Joel described the locusts as if they were an invading army destroying everything in their path. But after the disaster, Joel saw a time of restoration when God would pour out his Holy Spirit on all people in a way that no one had ever known in Old Testament times:

Joel 2 ²⁸ And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.
²⁹ Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

Dreams and visions are forms of prophecy too. Sometimes prophets heard a message (a word, an oracle) from God. Sometimes they saw a vision or dream—that's why they were also called "seers." Prophecy means hearing what God is saying (or seeing what God is doing), and declaring it. Prophecy is **speaking what God has revealed.**

(Matthew 26:68 is a good example of prophecy being revelation rather than prediction. When Jesus was arrested, his tormenters blindfolded him, and taunted him that if he was really a prophet he should be able to tell them by revelation which one of them had slapped him: "Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?")

In the new covenant, Holy Spirit is given to all believers, so we are instructed to "earnestly desire spiritual gifts, especially prophecy" (1 Corinthians 14:1). To develop this gift, learn to listen to Holy Spirit. You can do that in your own prayer time. Take a journal,

and jot down things that you think Holy Spirit may be saying to you. After a couple of weeks, look back over them and see which of them still sound like the voice of the Spirit and which don't. This will help you discern the voice of the Spirit.

Have you ever noticed how some people think in words, and others think in pictures? Holy Spirit does both. At times he gives a word; at times he gives a picture—an image, a vision in your mind. You will see things as they are. Sometimes these pictures clarify things: you see things as they really are, and it can be a great relief. At other times you see things as they will be: outcomes that don't yet exist, but the picture sets your mind at rest. Sometimes the picture can be disturbing: you become aware of needs you did not know existed, and you take them to prayer, perhaps groaning (labouring) in the Spirit as we saw in Rom 8:26. Journal these images as well, as sketches or words.

Example 7: Distinguishing spirits

Of course, Holy Spirit is not the only influence on us. We are all influenced by our own desires: both good desires (wanting the best for people) and bad desires (wanting the best for myself at the expense of others). There are also evil spirits at work, and we may need to discern those if we are to help people become free. Some of these are not obvious: Luke 13:11 speaks about a woman who was crippled by a spirit for 18 years, but most of us today would not imagine that a spirit would be the cause of a condition like that.

So, how do we discern whether we are hearing from Holy Spirit, our own spirit, or another spirit? At times this is really obvious. Paul began the chapter by explaining the key difference (12:1-3). Holy Spirit will always elevate Jesus as our ruler—the Lord who now runs the world (following his death, resurrection, and ascension). An evil spirit won't bow to the lordship of Jesus; in fact, it will be angry that Jesus is Lord. The key question to ask is, “**What's the attitude to the Jesus' authority?**” (Compare 1 John 4:1-6).

But how do you tell the difference between Holy Spirit's prompting and the feelings or ideas that come from your own spirit? I have two suggestions. The first is to journal, and then check back over what you wrote (as discussed above). The second is to listen to the feedback that people give you. Discernment is developed through use (Heb. 5:14).

You are not the only person who has the Spirit. In Old Testament times, only a few had the prophetic gifting, so when a prophet spoke to the community, the people had no sense within them as to whether this was the Spirit or not. That's why false prophets were so dangerous that Torah ordered them to be put to death (Deuteronomy 13:5; 18:20). But in the new covenant, the Spirit has been given to

everyone, so when a prophetic word is shared everyone can evaluate the message and so the community can provide feedback. That's exactly how Paul instructed us to work together:

1 Corinthians 14:29 Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should **weigh carefully** what is said.

How good is that! You share what you believe the Spirit is saying, and the other believers who also have the Spirit can help provide feedback as to what you are hearing is coming from Holy Spirit or from your own spirit.

The danger here is that we can swing too far the other way, and become suspicious of prophecy. If we do that we can quench the Spirit and devalue the message of our heavenly sovereign. We must get the balance right here: don't be cynical about prophecies, but do evaluate them since we all have the Spirit:

1 Thessalonians 5 ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²² reject every kind of evil.

Example 8: Tongues

Tongues simply means *languages*. Holy Spirit enables people to speak with languages they have not learned. That happened in Acts 2. On that occasion, there were visitors in Jerusalem who recognised their own language being used by uneducated Galileans "declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues" (Acts 2:11).

But most of the time, when someone speaks in tongues, there is no one present who recognises the language. Anyone else who is listening therefore feels left out: the speaker is being strengthened as they pray or worship or speak in the Spirit, but no one else is being helped.

The gift of tongues is therefore not a very useful gift for corporate use. Say you have 12 people in a Connect Group who can pray in tongues. Each of them takes a turn for 5 minutes praying in tongues. At the end of the hour, you might have been strengthened by your own 5 minutes of prayer, but for the rest of the hour you were twiddling your thumbs with no idea what was going on. You don't actually feel any closer to the others in the group; in fact, you may be feeling quite isolated!

So, the gift of tongues is different from all the other gifts of the Spirit. All the other gifts are for the benefit of the body of Christ, the sense of corporate togetherness, of together elevating the lordship of Jesus over his world. But the gift of tongues is unhelpful for our corporate life. It is therefore best **use this gift in your own prayer life** rather than in our shared life together:

1 Corinthians 14 ¹ 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. ⁴ Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church.

Don't demean the gift of tongues. It is probably the best way for you to learn how to speak in the Spirit. As you pray in tongues, you become accustomed to listening for what the Spirit is saying and giving voice to his message. When you don't know what to pray for, you can pray in the Spirit. When you run out of words to worship God, you can worship in the Spirit. Speaking in tongues really does grow you spiritually, especially your sensitivity to the Spirit that will empower you to stretch out with other gifts such as prophecy. Just don't use it publically. It helps you; it doesn't help others.¹

Example 9: Interpretation

There is one exception to the comments above, and that is if Holy Spirit gives someone the interpretation to a message given in another tongue. If interpreted, the message effectively becomes prophecy, so it does help others. It's just a long way round to get there.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul shows some ambivalence about the nature of tongues and interpretation in a corporate setting. He asks us to think about how unbelievers or outsiders will react if they hear us babbling on in tongues. They may think we've all gone mad, so they are not drawn towards faith at all (1 Corinthians 14:23). If people think we're weird, we have not succeeded in loving them.

And that's the whole point. **The gifts given by Holy Spirit are all intended to help us to love one another.** We are Jesus' body—expressing to one another the love he has for us. We are Jesus' body—the agents of his loving restorative healing reign in his world. Holy Spirit empowers us to be this, to be much more than we could be without his help.

That's the reason that the chapters of the gifts (1 Corinthians 12 & 14) have at their heart the chapter on love (1 Corinthians 13).

¹ In some circles, tongues is viewed as the evidence that someone has received the Holy Spirit, but Paul does not believe that everyone should have this gift (1 Corinthians 12:30). In Scripture, baptism with Holy Spirit is not an experience to be sought; it refers to the radical change that came upon the world when Jesus rose from the dead, cleansed it, established his kingship, and empowered everyone with the Spirit—not just a few (as it was previously).

Conclusion

The world was designed to be God's realm. We were designed to live under the authority of heaven. It was when we took power to ourselves that humans caused all the trouble in the world's relationships.

God has come to us in Jesus, to take the reins again. He's the most amazing ruler: he didn't kill his enemies, we killed him. God raised him from the dead, establishing him as ruler of heaven and earth. In fact, he's the only ruler worthy of the name!

As Jesus cleanses his world, bringing it back under divine authority as God's realm (kingdom of God), he gives Holy Spirit to his followers. Holy Spirit empowers us to declare that Jesus is Lord of the world, and he demonstrates the lordship of Jesus through the gifts he gives.

But to use the power of the Spirit outside of the love of Jesus is to wreak devastation on the world that Jesus is healing. We would be abusing God's power. In a world where the abuse of power is what's wrong, that's not only destructive but dishonouring of our king. Holy Spirit is recreating us as loving agents of Jesus' reign, so that's how we must use the gifts he provides.

Think of it this way:

1 Corinthians 13 ¹ 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. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonour 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.

⁸ Love 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. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. 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.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. **14** ¹ Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.

Group Questions

1. What is prophecy? Do you have any experience with God speaking like this (either through you or through others)?
2. Scripture says we should “earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophecy” (1 Corinthians 14:1). How can we develop the prophetic gifts?
3. Discuss how the gift of tongues works. Who does it help? How does it help? When should it be used?
4. In 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 Paul lists nine examples of Holy Spirit's gifts. How many of them are mentioned in chapter 13? How does the love chapter shape the way we use his gifts?

Memory Work

1 Corinthians 14:1 (NIV)

Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.

Take Home Exercise

Consider journaling as part of your prayer life.²

Think of prayer as a conversation with your heavenly Father about how he wants the family business run. He's in the business of caring for people. That includes people who are enjoying life in his family, and also people who do not know him but are still under his care. Prayer is therefore like an audience with a great ruler: you are privileged to speak with him about the things that concern you, but you also listen to him about the things that concern him.

So, listen to what Holy Spirit is saying. He may prompt you to pray for someone, to call or text someone who needs to be remembered, or to provide for a need someone has. He may prompt you to act (or to not act) in a certain way. In time, you grow to recognise his voice.

Jot down the promptings you feel, the words you hear, or the pictures he gives you as you pray. At the end of the week, review what you have heard the Spirit saying. As you look back, can you see more clearly which of these promptings were from the Holy Spirit and which ones came from your own heart? Are there some of the things he spoke to you about that still need your attention? Use your journal to help clarify the voice of the Spirit and learn his ways.

If you are still uncertain about some things, you might want to discuss them with a trusted friend who has the same values and sensitivities to the Spirit. Because all believers have the Spirit, others can help you discern what the Spirit is saying.

Come next week ready to discuss any of these things that you can (recognising that some issues need to be kept confidential, and others that won't be resolved within the week).

² See Sheridan Voysey, <http://sheridanvoysey.com/Why-You-Should-Keep-A-Journal>