

Prayers

Opening prayer

Glory be to You, O Lord our God, for you have brought us into a world in which there are so many fascinating things. Thank you for books to read, for the use of the internet, for beautiful and interesting things with which to fill our homes and food to buy in the shops and eat. Save us from using these things inappropriately or for dishonouring you in any way, and lead us to value all the gifts You so graciously give us, through Jesus Christ we pray, AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas_(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)

Call out to God and ask Him to bless your family and your friends. Do not hold back in seeking what is good and right for them, but submit your will to God's will.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for remote churches.** *Pray for the ancient Christian communities of Armenia, living on the borders of Turkey, Iraq and Syria and denied nationhood. Pray that they will maintain a constant and godly witness in what are troubles areas of the world*
- *Pray for all those who have been affected by the things that have dominated the news in your own country.*
- *Give thanks to God for the way that He has healed your body, perhaps through natural healing or in miraculous ways.*

Meditation

We take pictures and clips with camera or phone
And do it whenever we can;
We store hundreds of these on film or computer
An aid memoir of our past.

Each special moment is captured for posterity,
Reminding us of something special;
A beautiful scene, a family event,
A flower, or a precious moment.

Lord, forgive us for maintaining faith like memories
Just gathered from long ago;
Like a collection of religious memorabilia;
A sermon, a baptism, past friends.

Change us, Lord, from being hoarders of the past
To people who love your company;
So that we need no reminding of Your presence,
For You are with us, and we know it, all the time.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 12: 1-7

¹ Now regarding spiritual things, fellow believers, I do not want you to be ignorant. ² You know that when you were pagans you were continually led astray and enticed to dumb idols. ³

Therefore I must tell you that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Now there are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are different kinds of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are different kinds of working, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the evidence of the Spirit for the benefit of all.

Review

Today, we begin reading what is probably the most important section of 1 Corinthians, a passage that extends from the beginning of chapter 12 through to the end of chapter 14. In this part of his letter, Paul explains the fundamental principles of the Christian church. We already know that the Corinthian church had been torn apart by divisions, and by a whole series of problems (chapters 5 to 10). Paul has therefore just written extensively to challenge them to stand above such divisions and strife, especially when celebrating the Lord's Supper (in chapter 11). He now expands his vision even further to write about firstly the essential unity of Christ's church (chapter 12), secondly the rule of love by which all God's people are measured (chapter 13), and lastly, the true nature of worship in the church (chapter 14).

Now the first three verses of our passage today are rather difficult to understand, unless we keep this broad vision in mind. Paul was intent on instructing the Corinthians about these things, but they believed that they understood their faith perfectly well, they believed they knew how to worship, and did not need advice. So when Paul says, *'now regarding spiritual things, fellow believers, I do not want you to be ignorant'* (12:1), he is directly challenging them to accept that although they had received the empowering and blessing of God's Holy Spirit, they also needed the wise teaching of the Church. The same is true for all God's people, to this day.

Verse 2 then reveals something of why Paul challenges the Corinthians. He refers back to the common forms of pagan worship known to the Corinthians from before they were converted. Such worship is well documented, and it seems that it was often accompanied by what we might call spiritual excess; people were taken over by pagan deities in spiritual trances and believed that they spoke the words of the gods. Some converts simply transferred the expectation of such experiences into the church and their worship of Jesus Christ. Paul, however, knew that to do this was to place the emphasis on the experience of spiritual gifts and not on Christ, so he called on the Corinthians to think carefully about what the Spirit of God in them was truly calling them to do (12:3). The Spirit of God alone enables the Christian to make the great statement of faith, *'Jesus is Lord'*, spoken at the baptism of each believer, and the same Spirit will therefore always glorify Jesus Christ. He is the sole focus of all Christian life and worship.

While all this may be hard to grasp, the next four verses are far more straightforward. They launch immediately into the major theme of chapter 12, which is the contrast between the unity of God's people in Christ Jesus, and the individual Gifts of the Spirit given to individuals Christians. Now the Corinthians placed too much emphasis on certain spiritual gifts, and later on, chapter 14 gives an example of this when speaking about the gift of *'speaking in tongues'*. This spiritual imbalance, together with their divisions, lead Paul to offer what is now accepted as the most powerful description of the church of God in Scripture; the idea that the church is *'the body of Christ'*. This phrase is not found in our passage today, but the whole of chapter 12 leads up to this crowning point in verse 27, *'now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it'* (12:27).

Now verses 4 to 7 get to the heart of this Scripture, and each verses describes both the individual characteristics of the believer and the unity of the God who is worshipped. In verse 4, Paul mentions *'different kinds of gifts'*, then verse 5 mentions *'different kinds of service'*, and in verse 6, *'different kinds of working'*. These characteristics are all important for a full picture of worship, but as we will find tomorrow, Paul only chooses one of them to write about next; the *'different kinds of gifts'*. But this does not mean we should ignore differences in *'service'* and *'working'*, which are indeed elaborated upon by Paul elsewhere in his writing (e.g. Romans 12).

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of this passage is also found in verses 4,5 and 6, for they mention in order, the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ as Lord, and God. This is one of very New Testament Scriptures which speak of God as a 'Trinity' (another is Matthew 28 verse 19). Here, it is Paul's way of emphasising the supreme authority of God over his Church, and his generosity in giving people gifts, or as he says here, *'the evidence of the spirit for the benefit of all'* (12:7). This last verse concludes our reading, but as we will discover tomorrow, it also begins what he says next.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Lessons about spiritual things for ex-pagans (12:1,2)
- 'Jesus be cursed', and 'Jesus is Lord' (12:3)
- Different evidence, one God (12:4-7)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V1 'now concerning spiritual things...'

The Greek word used here is 'pneumatikos', which means 'things pertaining to the spirit'. In theory, it could be translated 'spiritual people' or 'spiritual things'. The reason why it is translated 'spiritual things' is because in the immediately following passage, Paul talks about things spiritual in general. Only later does he narrow down the discussion to spiritual gifts in verse 7 onwards.

V2 'you were continually led astray and enticed to dumb idols.'

The verse reads awkwardly for a number of reasons. One of these is because the Greek contains two verbs both meaning 'lead' or 'lead astray'. There are a number of possibilities, but the most likely is that this is a construction that suggests the on-going nature of what is described: hence 'continually ...'

V3 'Jesus be cursed'

This brief statement is 'Jesus is anathema' in Greek. It is not sure whether this is reported speech or simply Paul's description of what might be said. In common with other translators, I have written it in parallel with the rest of the sentence.

V7 'the evidence of the Spirit for the benefit of all.'

The word I have translated as 'evidence' is usually translated as 'manifestation'. The Greek word 'phanerosis' refers to bringing something to light, and although the traditional theological word for this is manifestation, I think that the English word 'evidence' now means the same thing, and is more readily understood by people.

Lessons about spiritual things for ex-pagans (12:1,2)

Right at the beginning of this chapter, you may be surprised to see this translation fails to follow the trend of most other Bible versions by saying 'spiritual things' instead of 'spiritual gifts'. I have explained the technical reason for it in the notes. What I have not explained is that the word the Bible generally uses for 'spiritual gift' is 'charisma', and not the word used here which is 'pneumatikos'. Clearly, if Paul wanted to say 'spiritual gifts' here, he knew what the right word was, but he chose a different one for the good reasons I have explained. It is difficult to go against the grain, but much has been made of Paul's use of the word 'spiritual gift', so it seems vital to me that a translation only use this expression when the word 'charisma' or its plural 'charismata' are found, and it is not found here. Paul wanted to speak to the Corinthians about spiritual things in general because he knew that the way people express themselves spiritually can be contentious, and he sought to place all spiritual things in the context of the authority of God, the Lordship of Christ, and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. This is the main thought behind today's text.

One concern Paul had was this, and he addressed it first. In the ancient world, many people regarded an excess of spiritual enthusiasm as a form of pure religious devotion. For example, a recent BBC docu-drama about life in the Roman Empire had a scene in which the wife of a senior Roman official demonstrated her religious fervour by standing underneath a bull in a cage whilst it was slaughtered, consequently being covered in the blood of the bull, which was then offered to the god she worshipped. It is a revolting scene, but well researched. Paul knew about such pagan forms of religious fervour, and when he spoke about being led astray continually to 'dumb idols', he and the Corinthians would have known what he meant; it was something like this BBC scene, and not mere religious excitement. Nevertheless, Paul did not want excitement about miracles, healing, speaking in tongues or the other great and wonderful 'gifts of the Spirit' to be categorised by non-Christians in the same way as such pagan excesses.

One problem for us here is that in classical Greek, such spiritual excess was called 'enthusiasm', or quite literally, 'being in God'; and in a pagan context, you can see why Paul was against this. However, in recent times, people use the word without knowing its original pagan overtones as a general word for 'energetic' or 'keen', and Christians use the word in the same way. When they are told what the word means, they ask, what wrong can there be in being 'in God', surely this is what Paul speaks about in many of his letters, urging us to be 'in Christ', and expressing considerable 'enthusiasm' himself throughout his writing (for example, in Ephesians 1)? Unfortunately, there are others within the Christian denominations who reject any demonstrative forms of religion, and knowing the pagan origins of this word, quickly accuse their brothers and sisters in Christ of inappropriate enthusiasm, even today. This unfortunate debate goes back even as far as Bishop Butler, who in the eighteenth century argued with the evangelist John Wesley in Bristol, and

called enthusiasm 'a horrible thing, sir, a horrible thing!' It is tragic that this criticism still exists in some churches, when all we have to do to resolve such unnecessary arguments is to point everyone to what Paul says about 'spiritual things' in this passage.

'Jesus be cursed', and 'Jesus is Lord' (12:3)

It may surprise you to know that over the years, people have been greatly taxed about why Paul should say what he does in this verse. My explanation above is that Paul's general point is to illustrate the things a truly spiritual person would say, being the proper and well known statement of faith 'Jesus is Lord'. Why then did Paul talk about someone who might say 'Jesus be cursed?' Even the Greek of this phrase is inelegant and rather unlike the simple and clearly understandable expression 'Jesus is Lord'.

There are a number of possibilities. Firstly, it might be that Paul simply used the expression 'Jesus be cursed' as a contrast to the affirmation 'Jesus is Lord'. However, it seems rather random to think that Paul made it up as an example. Another possibility is that Christians believed that when Jesus was killed on the Cross, he became a 'curse'. Reference to this can be found in Galatians 3:13, quoting Deuteronomy; 'cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'. It is just possible that in some kind of religious enthusiasm, some at Corinth were calling out 'Jesus be cursed' thinking mistakenly that by invoking the suffering of Christ, they were calling down His blessings! Obviously, if this was the case, Paul would have stifled the idea, but we just do not know whether this was so. Nevertheless, it is a good example of how people can get things wrong if they have heard a little about the Gospel, but not enough of the Word of God to make sound judgements.

There is one other possibility, which is that for one or other reason, some people said 'Jesus be cursed' or something similar, however strange this may seem to us. It could be that Jewish people were so incensed at the breakaway of the Christian church (from their perspective), that they 'cursed Jesus'. His fellow Jews had hurled many insults at Paul, and this may well have hurt him. Perhaps this had stuck in his mind. It is also possible that the Christian church was beginning to experience taunts from Roman officials that in due course, would result in the persecution of Christians. It is known that within a hundred years of Paul's writing this letter, Christians were formally required to 'curse Christ as a god' in order to be accepted within the Roman state and escape death (according to the collected letters of the Roman governor Pliny). Did the mobs who first heard Paul preach at Athens, Ephesus or Corinth call out 'curse this Jesus'? It would be understandable, and it could have formed the basis of the social sore that eventually resulted in persecution.

Although we do not know the source of Paul's comment for sure, it serves its purpose to highlight the true spiritual nature of one who openly declares Jesus as Lord. To this day, this statement remains a touchstones of Christian faith.

Different evidence, one God (12:4-7)

The last four short verses of this passage demonstrate Paul's Trinitarian theology, and also place the spiritual gifts alongside 'service' and 'works' as evidence of Christian faith. This, in itself is very important. However, these verses are usually used as a mere form of introduction to what comes next, which is Paul's list of the spiritual gifts. Many who write or speak about this passage say that the purpose is simply to explain that there 'are many gifts but the same Spirit' (12:4). This, of course, seems most appropriate as a suitable background to the coming list (12:8-11), but it is inadequate. We have already seen that the verses say far more than this, and it is right for us to try and get a fuller picture of why Paul should say this just before giving us the list of the 'spiritual gifts'.

The clue is to be found in the last verses of our passage, and as soon as we read it, we realise its true significance; 'To each is given the evidence of the Spirit for the benefit of all.' (12:7). In fact, this verse is the conclusion of all we have found out in the previous three verses, which is that spiritual gifts are but one of many forms of 'evidence' of God's spirit at work. This is not the place to explore the full meaning of 'service' and 'works', but we should at least remind ourselves that Jesus says that true faith must be demonstrated in good neighbourly 'deeds' (see the parable of the 'Good Samaritan' – Luke 10:30f., and his explanation of the law – Mark 12:31). James also explains in his letter that unless faith is accompanied by evidence of good deeds, then it is empty faith; 'be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves' (James 1:22 etc.). In addition, the evidence of true faith is also found in worship of the one true God, something demonstrated by the fact that the Greek and Hebrew words for 'service' also mean 'worship'. Worship is our service to God, whereas our service to others are the deeds just mentioned.

The proper background for our look at the list of spiritual gifts (coming tomorrow) is therefore a full understanding that these gifts must take their place amongst all the proper evidence of Christian faith; that is works, deeds, and service, and also worship. In this context, when Paul says 'to each is given the evidence of the Spirit for the benefit of all' (12:7), he means that the spiritual gifts must all be related to Christian works, service and worship as well as each other! This is not what most people suggest, however. It is commonly said that this whole section simply refers to the general unity of the Gifts of the Spirit, and serves

to tell people that all the gifts are important and united through the Spirit who gives them. Sadly, this is only one part of the picture, as we can now see; and it is probably an accidental reading into this text of what comes later in the chapter, in verses 14-26, concerning the nature of the body of Christ. This passage says that the gifts on their own lack meaning and significance. However, when they are part of the Christian life of service and worship, they become understandable and specifically useful. It would help any discussion of the Gifts of the Spirit for the way in which they connect to real Christian life and witness to be fully explained. This is what I intend to do tomorrow.

Discipleship

Application

There is a great deal within this passage, and by splitting the text after verse 7 and before the beginning of the list of gifts, we have been able to see something of the meaning of verses 4 to 7 which is often ignored and unnoticed. It seems to me to be incredibly important that we understand the context for the Gifts of the Spirit, and that they are indeed part of the life of worship and service to which a Christian is called by God. Spiritual Gifts are not some 'add on' to faith, as many think of them, they are integral to it, as this text suggests. We need to be persuaded by this scripture that the gifts stand alongside other expressions of Christian life as part of the evidence of God at work in our midst, and that they assist us in our life and worship.

It also seems to me that Christians need to 'bury the hatchet' about the use of the term 'enthusiasm', over which argument has raged for two thousand years, fuelled by an understanding of the word that has its origins in ancient Greece. I strongly suggest that we ditch the ancient use of the word because it is not how people use the word in common speech today. 'Enthusiasm' is regarded as a valuable work ethic and an impressive personal quality by employers, and young people justifiably fail to understand it when a pastor or professor, on the basis of privileged scholarly information about the use of the word in the ancient past, dismiss their 'enthusiasm' for God. In his day, Paul sought to warn Christians against over enthusiasm because of excesses within his culture. Perhaps today he would be wanting to encourage people to be enthusiastic because of the dour and personally unsatisfying nature of secular life experienced by so many in our world. Enthusiasm is surely now part of the proper attitude for our preaching of the 'Gospel', and not something to be avoided.

I have long been concerned that the spiritual gifts are not properly discussed in the life of the church, and that this is because they are discussed in isolation. This text is clear; they are part of the evidence of Christ at work in our lives, and this 'context' is important. It is vital that Christian people today learn the full meaning of 1 Corinthians 12. I know that I have learned much from working with the whole passage, and I hope that others will. I believe that the Spiritual Gifts in 1 Corinthians are all very important for the life of the church, but it is hard to explain this to some. Perhaps this passage today gives us a means to do this.

Questions for groups

1. In your group discuss what you mean by the term 'spiritual things'. What would you include in any list of these things?
2. What does the term 'Jesus is Lord' mean to you? If it is meaningful to you, when might you say this?
3. What does it mean for you to speak of 'the Spirit', Jesus 'as Lord' and 'God' as one and the same? What did it mean for Paul?

Discipleship challenges

- *In what ways do you demonstrate that you are a Christian? What 'works', 'service', and 'spiritual gifts' are you conscious of using in your Christian life? If you have difficulty answering this, then pray about this and ask the Lord what He is saying to you about it.*
- *Try to ensure that you discuss this subject with one or two other people, and find out what their views are about the 'spiritual gifts' mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12, and also Christian 'works' and 'service'.*

Final Prayer

All praise to You, Lord God Almighty, for You see all history, and You created time. We praise You for the beginning of the World, for You created it, and we praise you for its coming End at which You will come in Glory. Through Jesus, make us ready for the coming of Your Kingdom. AMEN
