

SERVING GOD'S PEOPLE

Believers receive special gifts from God for service to Him and His people.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-12,21-26

MEMORY VERSE: 1 CORINTHIANS 12:26

- **READ** 1 Corinthians 12:1-31, First Thoughts (p. 74), and Understand the Context (p. 74). As you read, pay close attention to the various ways Paul communicated the diversity of spiritual gifts. At the same time, notice how he emphasized that the various gifts are for one purpose: to serve God.
- **STUDY** 1 Corinthians 12:4-12,21-26, using Explore the Text (pp. 75–79). As you study, focus on the specific gifts listed. Be aware that additional gifts are identified in Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:28-30; Ephesians 4:11; and 1 Peter 4:9-11.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 80–81). Tailor the plans for your group using More Ideas (p. 82) and ideas included online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras. Consider creative ways to use the Suggested Music Idea (p. 82).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; The lyrics to the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy,” by Reginald Heber; Athletic or musical items for Focus Attention; and Paper and pens for each person. Make copies of: **PACK ITEM 8** (*Handout: Paul’s Lists of Spiritual Gifts*). Prepare to display the following Pack Item: **PACK ITEM 3** (*Key Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:20*). For More Ideas (p. 82): A large serving container, bowls, and napkins.



KEY DOCTRINE

Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit cultivates Christian character, comforts believers, and bestows the spiritual gifts by which they serve God through His church.

FIRST THOUGHTS

Think about someone who is athletically gifted. Now consider a gifted musician. How did those individuals get that way? If we focus on the hours of practice they endure, we might be led to think practice is what sets them apart. If we focus on the natural abilities required, we might be led to excuse ourselves from even trying to reach those same achievements.

(In PSG, p. 64) **What factors would you point to when thinking about people who are high achievers in their field? What factor do you think plays the biggest role? Explain.**

God gives spiritual gifts to His people, and these gifts are parallel to natural talents in many ways. Spiritual gifts, however, are received by individuals not when they are born biologically; rather, they are received by us as believers when we are born again. Further, just as natural talents must be recognized and developed, so it is with our spiritual gifts.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that each of them had received a special gift—or gifts—from God. These gifts were meant for service to Him and to His people. The principles Paul taught have ongoing significance for believers today.

BIBLE SKILL

Identify the imagery in a passage and discover what it communicates.

Observe the words and phrases in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 that describe a human body and its various parts. What does each word communicate to you about the nature of the church as the body of Christ and the role of individual believers? How is the imagery of the body like (or unlike) a local Christian congregation?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-31

Last week's lesson on the Lord's Supper was part of Paul's response to written questions the Corinthians had sent. Recall his words, "the matters about which you wrote" in 1 Corinthians 7:1 and "now concerning" in 7:25 and 8:1. Chapter 12 begins with "now concerning spiritual gifts."

The apostle's teaching in 1 Corinthians 12–14 continue the general theme of public worship, which he began in chapter 11. A quick scan of these three chapters shows that Paul's central concern was the proper exercise of spiritual gifts. Chapter 12 focuses on the diversity of spiritual gifts; chapter 13 emphasizes love in the use of spiritual gifts (next week's lesson); and chapter 14 highlights the specific gifts of tongues and prophecy.

In 12:1-11, Paul made the case for the diversity of gifts. He listed nine different spiritual gifts. Then, in verses 12-31, Paul made the case for the unity of gifts in the local congregation and compared it to the various organs and members of a human body. Paul's major concern throughout this teaching was for the Corinthian believers to recognize that they had been gifted to fulfill a God-initiated ministry in the congregation and that they were expected to use their God-given gifts for kingdom work.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

DIVERSE (1 COR. 12:4-6)

VERSES 4-6

Just as there is a variety of talents, so there is a variety of gifts. The term translated **gifts** in the original language (*charisma*) is closely related to the New Testament word usually translated “grace” (*charis*). In other words, a spiritual gift comes as a result of God’s grace. Further, whatever assortment of spiritual gifts there is, all gifts come from **the same Spirit**. The Holy Spirit determines which gift will be given to a particular believer.

Gifts are to be used in **varieties of service**. *Service* carries the idea of helping or serving the congregation. A form of this term was used for serving food to widows (Acts 6:2-3). The term later came to be used for the office of deacon (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8), those who had been recognized as church helpers. Congregations have different needs at different times, and often they meet the needs of those outside their own community. It is the **Lord**, Jesus Himself, who calls His people to such acts of service, using the gifts that the Spirit has given for that very purpose.

Various ministries lead to multiple **activities**. This term is unusual in the New Testament, typically meaning “effects” or “results.” Although we carry out the work or activities related to congregational life, it is **God**, the heavenly Father, who activates the working of these gifts.

Spiritual gifts are not limited to some elite class of leaders in the congregation.

Three additional points may be noted. First, **everyone** is involved in these things. Spiritual gifts are not limited to some elite class of leaders in the congregation. Second, Paul referred explicitly to each Person of the Trinity: *Spirit ... Lord ... God*. Just as there is diversity yet unity in God’s own self, so there is diversity yet unity in the gifts He bestows. Third, there is a logical relationship between *gifts*, *service*, and *activities*. *Gifts* are the fuel for and lead to *service*, and *service* is the fuel for and lead to *activities*.

(In PSG, p. 66) **Why is it important for each believer to realize that God has uniquely gifted him or her? What are the dangers of wanting to be gifted in a different way?**

1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-6

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Paul’s Spiritual Gifts Lists, A Comparison,” an archived *Biblical Illustrator* article provided on the CD-ROM in the Spring 2018 *Explore the Bible: Leader Pack*.

SPECIFIC (1 COR. 12:7-10)

1 CORINTHIANS 12:7

⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:8-10

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.

VERSE 7

The Spirit Himself is the precious gift given to each believer. His indwelling presence is evidence that we have been truly born again (Rom. 8:9). Here, Paul spoke about the **manifestation of the Spirit**, what the Spirit is currently doing for us. The exercise of the gifts of the Spirit will produce what is beneficial, that is, it will be **for the common good**.

VERSES 8-10

Paul's list of nine spiritual gifts in these verses should be thought of as representative rather than exhaustive. It may be compared to his list of seven gifts in Romans 12:6-8 (see also Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 4:9-11).

Paul did not define or describe in detail any of these nine gifts. Thus, we must draw on other passages of Scripture in order to make appropriate conclusions. Nevertheless, for some of these gifts Bible students have differing interpretations. What we all agree with is that every believer has received a gift or gifts according to God's will.

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Utterance of wisdom. Paul had severely criticized the "wisdom of the world" earlier in this letter (1:18-31). True wisdom, he had said, is found in the message about the crucified Christ. Thus, the *utterance of wisdom* must refer to declaring how the gospel applies to a particular situation, such as making wise decisions or choosing a right course of action. Some Bible students believe Paul was thinking about wisdom given by supernatural revelation; others believe he was thinking about the wisdom that comes more "naturally" through reflection on Scripture, prayer, and experience.

Utterance of knowledge. This phrase, like the preceding phrase, occurs here only in the New Testament. Thus it is difficult to know exactly what Paul meant or what the difference is between the *utterance of wisdom* and the *utterance of knowledge*. This gift may be related to prophecy, in which the prophet spoke by divine revelation. Paul probably meant knowledge of God that comes from direct revelation or the ability to teach correctly.

Faith. This is to be distinguished from saving faith, which all Christians have. Here Paul had in mind a gift received by some but not all believers. He likely meant the kind of mustard-seed faith that Jesus talked about (Matt. 17:20). This faith reflects the strong conviction that God will act in a particular way in a specific situation. Paul alluded to this kind of faith in 1 Corinthians 13:2. Persons with such great faith inspire and lead others to act in ways that they would not have thought was possible.

Gifts of healing. Both terms in this phrase are plural in the original, so the translation could be "gifts of healings." The reference is to bodily healing, of which many miraculous examples are found in the Gospels and Acts. By using the plural, Paul was making the point that different people are gifted in different kinds of healing (perhaps including medical

specialists of various kinds). Further, “healings” suggests that there are different kinds of illnesses and that there are various ways in which God heals—whether through miracle or medicine.

Working of miracles. Paul was referring to supernatural intervention in situations other than bodily healing. In the Gospels, Jesus performed astonishing miracles to point to His identity as Messiah (for example, the feeding of the five thousand and the stilling of the storm in John 6). The apostles continued this miracle ministry, as recorded in Acts (see 8:13; 14:8-10; 28:1-6). Bible students disagree whether throughout Christian history and today miracles have been ongoing.

Prophecy. Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke words God had revealed to them. Their ministries included both foretelling (predicting the future) as well as forth-telling (asking for a response, often repentance). In Acts, prophets had a similar ministry (see Acts 11:27-28; 13:1). This is the spiritual gift Paul was speaking about, a fulfillment of Joel 2:28-29 that prophecy would be widespread in the last days (see Acts 2:16-21). Paul later taught that prophecy builds up believers gathered for worship (1 Cor. 14:3).

Ability to distinguish between spirits. If there are true prophets of God, then there are also false prophets (which the Old Testament Israelites certainly experienced). Moses had provided instructions about discerning true prophets (see Deut. 18:20-22). In the New Testament churches, some believers were gifted with supernatural ability to distinguish between persons truly inspired by the Holy Spirit and those led astray by other spirits (see 1 John 4:1).

Various kinds of tongues. This gift has been controversial in our time, just as it was in Paul’s day, for he devoted much of 1 Corinthians 14 to a discussion of tongues. Did Paul have in mind known languages (as on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:4-8)? Or was this gift a kind of ecstatic speech (“tongues ... of angels,” 1 Cor. 13:1)? Two points that Paul later made are important to note: not all Christians have this gift (12:30); and those with this gift are to control when and how they use it (14:27-28).

Interpretation of tongues. If persons gifted in languages did not understand what they were saying, then it was important for a translation to be provided. This would be true whether the speech was a known human language or ecstatic speech. Paul later taught that in public worship there must be no more than two or three people who spoke in such languages, each in turn, and that a translation or interpretation must be provided (14:27-28).

Why do you think Paul mentioned the Holy Spirit so frequently in this passage (five times in vv. 7-9)? How should that emphasis impact the way we view spiritual gifts?

INTENTIONAL (1 COR. 12:11-12,21-26)

1 CORINTHIANS 12:11-12

¹¹ All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. ¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:21-23

²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."
²² On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty,

VERSES 11-12

As Paul concluded his brief list of various manifestations of the Spirit, he made a general observation which contains three elements.

- All spiritual gifts come from one and the same Spirit. If the Spirit has given them, then they are all important, for He always acts with intent.
- Each person in the congregation has received a gift (or gifts). Therefore, each person has a ministry in the life of the church.
- It's the Spirit who sovereignly distributes gifts as He wills. We do not get to pick our own spiritual gifts, any more than we picked our own natural talents. This means that no one should feel superior (or inferior) because he or she has (or does not have) any particular manifestation of the Spirit.

The apostle compared the church to a human body. He began by making two assertions that set up his analogy. First, the human **body is one**. There is a unity to the human body even though it has many parts. Second, just as the human body has many parts, **so it is** with the church, the body of Christ. There is always unity and diversity in the congregation, just as there is in the human body.

We do not get to pick our own spiritual gifts, any more than we picked our own natural talents.

VERSE 21

In verses 15-17, Paul noted the role of the foot, the hand, the ear, and the eye. In verse 21, he imagined a scene in which body parts questioned their need for other body parts. It's inconceivable, for example, for an **eye** to tell a **hand** that it can function quite well without it. Eyes and hands do different things. In a healthy human body, they work together. Similarly, the **head** can't say to the **feet** that they aren't needed. We can imagine a modern cartoon animator at work drawing a head getting along without feet for the sake of a laugh. In real life, when body parts don't cooperate, we're aware of a horrible tragedy. So it is when members of the body of Christ aren't working together, each with its own unique contribution. It's a tragedy.

VERSES 22-23

Paul extended the discussion by focusing on body parts that seem to be **weaker** and are often not thought about. He didn't specify which human body parts he had in mind. Whatever the part, it is necessary, once human anatomy is understood. So it is in the congregation. Members who seem to be weak or unimportant are truly essential. No one in the church, therefore, has the right to look down on another member.

Paul also did not specify which human body parts were **less honorable** or **unrepresentable**. But he spoke immediately of clothing such parts so that they have **greater honor** or better presentation. Perhaps he thought

about how we put rings on fingers and how we can take care to cover our torsos with nice clothing (the main function of which is for the sake of modesty). If someone puts on earrings (and whoever thought earlobes were important?), then surely it's not too much for the church to act similarly. We are to honor persons whom we naturally tend to overlook.

VERSES 24-26

Paul moved from unrespectable parts of the body (which are generally covered with clothes and are therefore not seen) to our **presentable parts**. These parts have no need of clothing. (Think of faces and arms, although again Paul did not specify.) God has put the human body together in such a way that we give greater honor through clothing and adornment to the parts of the body that are considered less honorable. The honorable remains unadorned; the less honorable gets the special attention of adornment. In the church, those who have obvious, public gifts need no special attention; those whose gifts and ministries are obscure are to be recognized and given special respect.

The apostle believed that this analogy strengthened his case for the unity of the church as the body of Christ. He added an additional reason: **no division in the body** is permissible. The various parts are to exhibit a mutual **care for one another**. All parts are interdependent—many yet one; one yet many.

Every Christian matters in the life of the church at large—and to other believers individually.

Do you know what it feels like to hit your thumb with a hammer? Although only your thumb was hurt, your whole body is shot through with pain. Or, to choose a different example, when you've enjoyed a shampoo, your whole body feels relaxed. So Paul extended the illustration. **If one member**—of the human body or of the church—**suffers, all suffer together**. Similarly, **if one member is honored**, then the others share in the honor. Every Christian matters in the life of the church at large—and to other believers individually. Because we are all united to Christ, what happens to one affects the others, whether it involves joy or suffering.

How might we guard against overemphasizing some gifts over others?

1 CORINTHIANS 12:24-26

²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

DISPLAY: As the group arrives, call attention to a display of athletic equipment (examples: athletic shoes, golf ball, baseball, team jersey). As an alternative option, select a music theme (examples: musical instrument, music book, CD). Invite volunteers to name gifted athletes (or musicians).

ASK: *What factors would you point to when thinking about people who are high achievers in their field? What factor do you think plays the biggest role? Explain.* (PSG, p. 64)

TRANSITION: *In this week's study of spiritual gifts, we will learn that God gifts His followers for service to Him and His people.*

EXPLAIN: Help the group recognize the difference between natural talents and spiritual gifts. Clarify that individuals receive natural talents when they are born biologically, while believers receive spiritual gifts when they are born again through Christ's salvation.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: As you read aloud 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, emphasize the words "different/differences" and "same" each time they are mentioned.

EMPHASIZE: Lead the group to underline all the occurrences of "different/differences" and "same" in this passage. Then invite volunteers to call out the word that follows each use. Note that while gifts, ministries, and activities are different, God remains the same.

CLARIFY: Call attention to the information under Verses 4-6 (PSG, p. 66) to explain the concepts of unity and diversity. Point out that the same Spirit gives gifts, but those gifts might manifest themselves through various ministries in the church and also through a broad range of activities that equip and edify God's people. Say: *In the body of Christ, not all have the same gifts or assignments, but they do share the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God.*

GUIDE: Lead group members to locate the three references to God in this passage ("Spirit," "Lord," and "God"). Explain that this represents the Trinity, or God's three-in-oneness. Direct a volunteer to recall or read the words to "Holy, Holy, Holy" by Reginald Heber, which is based on the reality of the Trinity.

TRANSITION: *All believers are gifted to fulfill a God-initiated role in the ministry of the church. The Holy Spirit initiates and determines what gifts will be given to what believers. In the next section of verses, Paul identified specific spiritual gifts.*

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud 1 Corinthians 12:7-10, as the rest of the group listens for specific gifts the Spirit gives to believers.

DISCUSS: *Identify ways in which a person might use a spiritual gift to benefit himself or herself rather than the church. How can believers guard against those tendencies?* (PSG, p. 67)

REPORT: Distribute copies of **Pack Item 8** (*Handout: Paul's Lists of Spiritual Gifts*). Form small teams, and provide paper and pens to each team. Assign each team specific gifts from the handout. Lead each team to use the Bible references listed on the handout and the information under Verses 8-10 (PSG, pp. 67–69) to provide insight into each assigned spiritual gift. Invite volunteers from each team to report information to the large group.

SAY: *Believers receive specific gifts that are given at the Holy Spirit's discretion.*

DISCUSS: *How does knowing that it is the Holy Spirit who gives the gifts create confidence in a believer to exercise his or her gift? How is receiving a spiritual gift part of a believer's stewardship? (PSG, p. 69)*

TRANSITION: *Each spiritual gift is important to the church and strategically intentional in its placement. Just as the human body must function as one unit, so too must the body of Christ.*

READ: Direct the group to notice the way Paul used the analogy of the human body to describe the unity and diversity of the body of Christ, while a volunteer reads aloud 1 Corinthians 12:11-12,21-26.

MINI-LECTURE: Present a mini-lecture about Paul's four key claims that weaker or more feeble parts of the body are essential. These key claims are discussed in the paragraphs under Verses 21-26 (PSG, pp. 70–71).

EMPHASIZE: *The purpose of spiritual gifts is not to build up individuals, but to benefit the church. Direct attention to **Pack Item 3** (Key Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:20), and lead the group to discuss how our individual and collective spiritual gifts help us to be better ambassadors for Christ. To further guide the discussion, ask: *How does the variety of gifts in a church give greater value to the giftedness of an individual? Why might a person devalue the role or gift God has given him? How can a person protect himself from devaluing his giftedness?* (PSG, p. 71)*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

REVIEW: Lead in a review of the bulleted statements listed under In My Context (PSG, p. 72). Invite volunteers to name which verses from today's session support each of the statements.

RESPOND: Direct attention to the information about a Spiritual Gifts Survey in the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 72): *Seek to identify the spiritual gift(s) God has given you. (You can find a spiritual gifts inventory in the downloads under the resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible.) How are you using your gift to build up your local church? What actions do you need to take to be more effective?* Encourage everyone to complete the survey following the session.

PRAY: Lead in prayer, thanking God for each believer's special gift from God. Pray for the group as they use their God-given spiritual gifts in kingdom work.



PRACTICE

- Pray for your group and your church, praising God for the gifts He has given and for those who are using them in His service.
- Write notes to your group, thanking them for using their specific gifts for the Lord.
- Remind everyone to complete the spiritual gifts inventory online. (You can find a spiritual gifts inventory in the downloads under the resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible.) Assure them that you are praying for them as they seek to identify and use the gifts God has given them.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the Focus Attention activity, before the session, invite volunteers to bring a small amount of their favorite pre-packaged snack foods, such as chips, candy, or cookies. Be mindful of any food allergies in the group. Provide a large serving container, and ask volunteers to pour their snacks in the container. Begin the session by noting that the mixture is very diverse, yet it serves one purpose: to be used by the group. Provide napkins and bowls, and then invite the group to sample the mixture during the session.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To enhance the discussion of 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, lead group members to brainstorm the variety of ministries and activities in your church. Invite volunteers to share which ministries and activities in which they serve. Record their responses. Discuss: *Why is it important for each believer to realize that God has uniquely gifted him or her? What are the dangers of wanting to be gifted in a different way?* (PSG, p. 66)
- To provide additional insight into 1 Corinthians 12:7-10, lead the group to discuss how having multiple gifts within a church body allows many different needs to be met. Share about times when the abilities of many worked together to help others both inside and outside your small group or entire church.
- To supplement discussion of 1 Corinthians 12:11-12,21-26, form two teams. Instruct each team to think of a way, other than the human body, to illustrate what Paul taught in this passage. Lead groups to restate 1 Corinthians 12:12,21 with the different analogy. Invite groups to share what they emphasized and why.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead group members to reflect on how God has used individuals to make a difference in His church. Suggest that the group write notes of appreciation to those who have influenced their lives by sharing their spiritual gifts.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEA

Use the song “If We Are the Body,” by Casting Crowns, as a time of commitment. Encourage the group to prayerfully commit to using individual gifts to serve God.