

Spiritual Gifts

...expressing the character
and power of God



Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts...

(1 Corinthians 14:1 - ESV)

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Study #1



Introduction

The subject of spiritual gifts is complex and often misunderstood—1 Cor 12:1 (The Message):

What I want to talk about now is the various ways God's Spirit gets worked into our lives. This is complex and often misunderstood, but I want you to be informed and knowledgeable.

But this is a subject we must explore, if we are to grow as disciples of Jesus, because it encompasses crucially important ways that God seeks to express His life through us.

What follows is not intended to be a comprehensive treatment of this subject, because whole books have been written, not only on this subject as a whole, but also on many of the individual spiritual gifts. Rather, this will be a limited attempt to describe some foundational principles and the main aspects of each spiritual gift.

Let's start with some important perspective on this subject...

Perspective

Two dimensions of "*God's invisible qualities*" have been "*clearly seen*" from the moment He created the cosmos—Rom 1:20 (TNIV - emphasis added):

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

His "eternal power" is demonstrated, for example, by His creation of the cosmos, evidencing that He is "*...the God...who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.*" (Rom 4:17 - ESV)

His "divine nature" is demonstrated, for example, by the fact that "*...he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*" (Matt 5:45 - ESV)

Jesus, then, came to earth and demonstrated these same two dimensions of "*God's invisible qualities*":
...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and...he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. (Acts 10:38 - TNIV - emphasis added)

Now, by His Spirit, Jesus wants to demonstrate both dimensions of His "*invisible qualities*" through each of us:
And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:18 - ESV)

...all who have faith in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. (John 14:12 - TNIV)

Here is some imagery that God uses to explain what this will require from us. We have a "race" to run in life: *...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.* (Heb 12:1 - TNIV)

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. (1 Cor 9:24 - TNIV)

Using this imagery, if we are to "run with perseverance the race marked out for us", and "run in such a way as to get the prize", we will need to run (the race of life) on two (strong) "legs".

What might those two "legs" be? Here is a key Bible verse that describes two basic dimensions to our life: *Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.* (1 Cor 14:1 - ESV)

Based on this verse, to run our race of life, we need to:

❶ "Pursue love" AND ❷ "earnestly desire the spiritual gifts"

Another way of describing this is that we need to demonstrate both:

❶ the fruit of the Spirit AND ❷ the gifts of the Spirit ...or

❶ the character of God AND ❷ the power of God.

In effect, 1 Corinthians 14:1 is a summary of our responsibility to run the race of life in such a way that we demonstrate, to the world, both dimensions of "God's invisible qualities":

❶ His "divine nature" AND ❷ His "eternal power".

And here is a crucial connection between these two dimensions of "God's invisible qualities":

Character without Power is Deficient ...and

Power without Character is Dangerous ...but

Character with Power is Discipleship

Let's expand these three statements:

Character without Power is Deficient

If God had no power, we wouldn't even be here. If Jesus had no power, the multitudes that came to Him for healing would soon have melted away and, probably, not come to Him in the first place:

23 Jesus went all over Galilee, teaching in the synagogues, preaching the Good News about the Kingdom, and healing people who had all kinds of disease and sickness. 24 The news about him spread through the whole country of Syria, so that people brought to him all those who were sick, suffering from all kinds of diseases and disorders: people with demons, and epileptics, and paralytics — and Jesus healed them all. 25 Large crowds followed him from Galilee and the Ten Towns, from Jerusalem, Judea, and the land on the other side of the Jordan. (Matt 4:23-25 - TEV)

These crowds of people weren't coming to hear a sermon about character, although they often received that. They were coming to experience the power of God to set them free from "all kinds of disease and sickness". And, when they experienced His "eternal power", they also experienced His "divine nature", especially His love.

There's nothing different today...except that, now, we are the ones through whom God wants to demonstrate both His "eternal power" and His "divine nature" to a needy world.

Power without Character is Dangerous

This statement doesn't really need explanation. We can only begin to imagine what life would be like if the Creator of the cosmos had "eternal power" but no "divine nature". We can look at the world around us and see daily demonstrations of power without character, and we know that this is destructive in the spiritual realm as well as in the physical realm.

Character with Power is Discipleship

Let's start by considering the character of God...that we can equate to the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23).

Possibly all believers accept the importance of developing the character of God, especially by showing love to people. Although, there are two major challenges we might face in activating this as God intends:

1. We are called to demonstrate character that goes beyond what is natural, because the character of God is beyond what is natural. We are called to show unconditional love to everyone, as God does, for example: *43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* (Matt 5:43-48 - ESV)
2. Not only are we called to show unconditional love to everyone, in 1 Cor 14:1 we are also commanded to "*pursue love*". What does that mean? The word "*pursue*", in 1 Cor 14:1, is translated from a Greek word "*dioko*", that means "to pursue (literally or figuratively); by implication, to persecute" (PCSB). This same Greek word is used, for example, in Matt 23:34 (NIV - underlined):
Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.

Jesus was saying, here, that the scribes and Pharisees would relentlessly hunt down some of the "*prophets and wise men and teachers*" that He would send. So, the picture we get is that "*pursue love*" means:

...relentlessly hunt down opportunities to show unconditional love to everyone.

Now, let's turn our attention to the power of God...that we can equate to the gifts of the Spirit.

With this power dimension of "*God's invisible qualities*" (Rom 1:20), we know there isn't the same general acceptance, across the body of Christ, that we should "*earnestly desire the spiritual gifts*"...or even regard them as still functioning today. That could be a first challenge for many believers. And there are many more challenges we could face in activating this exhortation as God intends. But, for now, let's focus on one point—the strength of this exhortation to "*earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy*".

It would be easy to read a phrase like "*earnestly desire*" and skip over it, fairly readily, without sensing that it carries any unusual 'weight'. But the words "*earnestly desire*" come from a Greek word "*zeloo*", that is the root of our English words "zeal" and "zealot". As these are slightly old-fashioned words, they probably don't add much light. So, let's look at a Bible example of a zealot—Saul (also known as Paul). In the two passages that follow, I have underlined some phrases that describe the commitment typical of a zealot:

13 For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. 14 I was...extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers. (Gal 1:13-14 - NIV)

9 I...was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. 10 ...I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. 11 Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them. (Acts 26:9-11 - NIV)

In Gal 1:14, "*zealous*" is translated from "*zelotes*", the adjectival form of "*zeloo*". And considering the intensity of what is described in these passages, we get a picture of the strength of "*earnestly desire*" in 1 Cor 14:1. Incidentally, for a modern example of a zealot, I would suggest a suicide bomber or a martyr—someone who is so committed to a cause (good or bad) that they will lay down their life for that cause! So, the picture we get is that "*earnestly desire the spiritual gifts*" means, at least:

...do everything possible to exercise spiritual gifts.

...expressing the character and power of God

Now, let's combine the expanded meanings of these two dimensions of "*God's invisible qualities*" to form an accurate, adequate, and correctly balanced, biblical perspective on the meaning of 1 Cor 14:1:

"Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts" is a call to embrace a balanced commitment to show unconditional love to everyone and do everything possible to exercise spiritual gifts.

Spiritual gifts are not some Pentecostal optional extra in Christian life—they are an integral component of biblical discipleship for every believer.

Let's finish by coming back to the exhortation to "*earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy*". Considering what we've covered, especially the expanded meaning of 1 Cor 14:1 that I've just given, there are probably four groups of believers today, holding one of the following four positions, theologically and/or in practice:

1. I am not convinced that spiritual gifts are for today.
2. I am convinced that spiritual gifts are for today...but not convinced that I could exercise spiritual gifts.
3. I am convinced that spiritual gifts are for today...and that I can exercise spiritual gifts...but I have not been earnestly desiring to exercise spiritual gifts.
4. I am convinced that spiritual gifts are for today...and that I can exercise spiritual gifts...and I am earnestly desiring to exercise spiritual gifts.

Application (App-SG-Study#1.doc)

1. Which of the four groups, listed in Study #1, best describes my current position?
2. What main factors have contributed to me classifying myself in this group?
3. If I'm not in group 4, can I identify what might be holding me back...and what will I do about this? If I am in group 4, what steps am I taking to further understand and exercise spiritual gifts?

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Study #2



Building a theology on spiritual gifts

How important is it that we learn to understand, and exercise, spiritual gifts?

1 Cor 14:1 (ESV): *"Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy"*. This is not a suggestion or a recommendation—it's a command. And I recognise that this command still applies today—it wasn't made redundant by the completion of the canon of Scripture or made obsolete for any other reason. My view is that, one day, we will all stand before our Creator and Lord to give account for how we responded to this command (among others). In addition, when we exercise spiritual gifts (correctly), we demonstrate love to people in unique and powerful ways for which the fruit of the Spirit can never be a substitute. I don't think it's possible to fully *"pursue love"* if we don't also *"earnestly desire the spiritual gifts"*.

Then I consider the main block of Bible teaching on this subject, in 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14. I recognise that the writer (Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) introduced this block of teaching with an important preface that gives us God's own answer to the starting question I posed:

Now about spiritual gifts, brothers [and sisters], I do not want you to be ignorant. (1 Cor 12:1 - NIV)

The Greek word that is translated *"ignorant"* in this verse is "agnoeo", meaning "not to know (through lack of information or intelligence); by implication, to ignore (through disinclination)" (PCSB). So this preface alerts us, at the outset, that we should seek to understand, and exercise, spiritual gifts...and not ignore them... or be disinclined to understand, or exercise, them for any reason.

What are spiritual gifts?

Here is a crucial Bible definition—1 Cor 12:4-7 (ESV - emphasis added):

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

A "spiritual gift" is a (supernatural) manifestation of the Holy Spirit through a believer. Alternatives to the word "manifestation" could be words like "revealing", "appearing", "expression" or "demonstration".

As we saw in Study #1, God seeks to demonstrate, to the world, two dimensions of His invisible qualities—His eternal power and His divine nature (Rom 1:20)—and one way He seeks to do this is through the operation of spiritual gifts, through His children...or at least those who are prepared to *"earnestly desire the spiritual gifts"*.

...expressing the character and power of God

Although both of these dimensions are important with spiritual gifts, there seems to be a greater focus on God's eternal power being expressed through spiritual gifts. This same emphasis can be seen in Jesus' promise to His immediate disciples (and, effectively, to every disciple since then)—in Acts 1:8 (NIV - emphasis added): "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses..."

This verse also instructs us that baptism in the Holy Spirit is the 'doorway' to exercising spiritual gifts, because that expression—"when the Holy Spirit comes on you"—is one of six alternate expressions used in the Bible to describe an introductory experience of being "filled with the Spirit" or "baptized in the Holy Spirit". And the "power" dimension to this experience is confirmed by the fact that a (supernatural) spiritual gift—speaking in tongues—is intended to accompany baptism in the Holy Spirit, in part, as a testimony to the main purpose for baptism in the Holy Spirit...that we have entered into a relationship with the Holy Spirit through which all of the supernatural gifts of the Spirit can now be manifested.

What are some key implications of this definition of spiritual gifts?

Spiritual gifts are exercised by partnership between the Holy Spirit and an individual believer. We can't exercise spiritual gifts without the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit won't exercise spiritual gifts, through us, without our active participation—that is why we are urged to *"earnestly desire the spiritual gifts"*.

This has some important implications. In particular:

(1) Our exercise of spiritual gifts is not something that will happen automatically...without our active co-operation and initiative. It is not a matter of us waiting for the Holy Spirit to manifest His gifts through us if He wants to—He always wants to demonstrate this essential dimension of *"God's invisible qualities"* (Rom 1:20). He is waiting for us to respond to His command to *"earnestly desire the spiritual gifts"*.

(2) The Holy Spirit will never violate our free will. For example, 1 Cor 14:32-33 (NIV):

32 The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets 33 For God is not a God of disorder but of peace...

This means we are responsible for our actions (or lack of action) when it comes to exercising spiritual gifts.

(3) Spiritual gifts don't come full formed. The Holy Spirit doesn't need to learn how to manifest His gifts through us. But we need to learn how to partner with the Holy Spirit...so it is crucial that we grow in our understanding, and expression, of spiritual gifts. This is why Paul prefaced his main teaching on spiritual gifts by exhorting us not to be *"ignorant"* about them (1 Cor 12:1).

(4) The exercise of spiritual gifts could involve some 'mixture' of that which is from the Holy Spirit and that which is not...because it involves a partnership between the Holy Spirit and a (fallible) person. That shouldn't deter us, because we are urged to *"earnestly desire the spiritual gifts"*...and urged to 'test' spiritual gifts, which is another evidence that the exercise of spiritual gifts could involve some mixture:

19 Do not put out the Spirit's fire; 20 do not treat prophecies with contempt. 21 Test everything. Hold on to the good. (1 Thess 5:19-21 - NIV)

Not only do we need training in exercising spiritual gifts—so that we minimise (ideally, avoid) mixture—we also need training in how to *"test everything"*...how to carefully examine expressions of spiritual gifts and learn to discern what is *"good"*, so that we can *"hold on to the good"*.

Application (App-SG-Study#2.doc)

What is my response to Study #2?