

A Derek Prince

Teaching Letter

No. 23: The Gifts of the Holy Spirit



Dear Friend

When Abraham sent his servant from Canaan to Padan Aram to seek a bride for his son Isaac, the servant loaded ten camels to take with him. In the Middle East I have seen with my own eyes how much can be loaded onto a camel. It is amazing!

The ten camels with their loads were visible evidence that Abraham was an honoured, prosperous man. Included in their loads were precious gifts of jewellery. When the servant found the young woman who was to become Isaac's bride, his first act was to place on her face a very conspicuous nose jewel.

By accepting the gift Rebecca committed herself to become Isaac's bride. Had she refused the gift, however, she would have rejected and dishonoured Isaac. She could never have become his bride.

Today, in a similar way, God has sent His Holy Spirit with abundant provision for the bride of His Son Jesus – the Church. Included in it are nine beautiful spiritual gifts. By accepting these gifts, the Church is marked out as the one who is committed to become the Bride of Christ.

Nine Supernatural Gifts

These nine gifts are listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10. To bring out the exact meaning, I give the following literal translation: 1. a word of wisdom; 2. a word of knowledge; 3. faith; 4. gifts of healings; 5. workings of miracles (literally, powers); 6. prophecy; 7. discernings of spirits; 8. kinds of tongues; 9. interpretation of tongues.

All these gifts are "manifestations." The Holy Spirit Himself is invisible, but through these gifts He manifests Himself. He impacts our senses in ways that we can see or hear or feel.

All of them are "for the profit of all." Through them Christians can minister to one another. They all serve some practical purpose. They are tools, not toys.

All these gifts are supernatural. They are not the product of natural ability or special education. An illiterate person may receive a word of wisdom or of knowledge. Similarly, the gift of "faith" goes beyond the faith that we all need for salvation. It is also distinct from the fruit of faith, which comes by a process of natural growth. It is a supernatural faith that goes beyond our natural ability and produces supernatural results.

It is often suggested that these gifts were withdrawn at the close of the apostolic age and are not available today. However, Paul thanked God for the Christians at Corinth because "you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed."¹ Obviously, therefore, Christians are expected to continue to exercise spiritual gifts until the return of Christ.

The first two gifts that Paul lists – a word of wisdom and a word of knowledge – are related in a practical way. A word of knowledge gives us the facts about a situation. Then a word of wisdom shows us how God wants us to deal with that situation.

Some of the gifts are plural in both parts: e.g. gifts of healings; workings of miracles; discernings of spirits; kinds of tongues. This indicates that each healing, each miracle, each discerning, each utterance in a certain tongue (language) is a gift. If a certain gift regularly manifests itself through a certain person, we may say that the person has that gift.

Gifts That Cannot Be Earned

It must be emphasised that all these are gifts of God's grace. They are received by faith. We can never earn them. We can never be "good enough" to exercise them.

In 1941 in the middle of the night I had a powerful, life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ in a barrack room of the British Army. About a week later, in the same barrack room, I spoke for the first time in an unknown tongue. Then – quite unexpectedly – I went on to speak out the "interpretation" in beautiful, poetic English. It was an outline of God's plan for my life and ministry, which has been fulfilled – stage by stage – up to the present time (more than 55 years).

Fortunately for me, I was too "unspiritual" to know that you had to go to church to get saved, or that after speaking in a tongue you had to wait six months to receive the gift of interpretation!

From 1957 to 1961 I served as Principal of a Teacher Training College for African teachers in Kenya. During that time we had a sovereign visitation of the Holy Spirit in our college. In meetings with my students I saw all nine gifts of the Spirit in operation among us at various times. I also saw two of my students – on different occasions – raised from the dead. They both testified later of what they had experienced while their spirits were out of their bodies.

Later, in America, I received an unexpected "gift" for ministering to people who were lame. As I seated them in a chair and held their feet in my hands, the shorter leg would grow out in front of my eyes and they would be healed. Some people, however, suggested that this was not an appropriate ministry for a dignified, scholarly Bible teacher. I decided to ask the Lord about this and I felt He gave me this answer: "I have given you a gift. There are two things you can do with it. You can use it and get more. Or you can fail to use it and lose it." There and then I decided to go on using what God had given me, and indeed I did receive more.

On occasion I have seen a short leg grow out as much as two inches. Also the release of God's supernatural power in this way triggered other miracles. In one place, without any special prayer being offered, a man was healed of three major infirmities and delivered from nicotine addiction.

I remember one lady who came with a paper bag in her hand and a 1½-inch build-up on the heel of one shoe. When I took her feet in my hands, her short leg grew out 1½ inches. Then she opened her paper bag and took out a pair of new shoes with perfectly normal heels. They fitted her perfectly.

I eventually decided that the scriptural name for my gift was "workings of miracles (power)."

About the same time God directed me into what I came to see as a different application of the same gift. He began to use me in the public casting out of demons. Once again, there were those who objected to the noisy and disorderly manifestations that often accompanied this ministry. I observed, however, in the Gospels that similar manifestations often accompanied the ministry of Jesus and so I decided to continue. In the years that followed I have seen thousands of people wonderfully delivered from demon power.

If we desire the unhindered operation of spiritual gifts, we sometimes need to set ourselves free from traditional ideas of how we should behave "in church."

Another key to exercising spiritual gifts is to cultivate sensitivity to the Holy Spirit and to make room for Him to move as and when He wills. On one occasion Ruth and I were having lunch with a Christian couple and the wife shared that she had a medically diagnosed genetic defect which made her unable to utilise certain amino acids. Her brain was progressively deteriorating.

The husband left to keep another appointment and we walked back with the wife to their apartment. On the parking lot we paused for a moment to say goodbye. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, Ruth said, "Let me pray for you." Then we parted.

About three weeks later the husband told us that his wife had been completely healed. This was later confirmed at the same hospital where her condition had been diagnosed.

God had just one place and one moment where He made healing available. Because Ruth responded to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, healing came and God was glorified.

Limitations of Spiritual Gifts

I feel a familiar tingle of excitement as I think back over some of the ways in which I have seen spiritual gifts manifested. At the same time, however, it is important to understand that there are definite limits to what we can expect from spiritual gifts.

First of all, spiritual gifts are limited to the present life. Speaking of the gifts of prophecy, tongues and the word of knowledge, Paul says, "But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears."²

We are still living in the "imperfect" age. But when we pass from time to eternity and then put on our resurrection bodies, we will no longer need the fragmentary blessings that come to us through tongues or prophecy or a word of knowledge. The same applies to other gifts such as healings or miracles. Our resurrection bodies will never need them!

If people are excessively preoccupied with spiritual gifts, it often indicates that they are more concerned with the things of time than eternity. Such people need to heed Paul's warning: "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."³

More important still, the exercise of spiritual gifts gives no indication of a person's character. Let me illustrate with a crude example. Suppose a person who is lazy, deceitful and conceited receives an unearned gift of one million pounds. His character will not be changed at all. He will still be lazy, deceitful, conceited. In fact, he may even be more conceited because he has a million pounds in his bank account!

The same applies to a person who receives a dramatic spiritual gift, such as prophecy or healings or miracles. If he was weak and unstable before, he will be just as weak and unstable afterwards. But his new gift will give him greater influence with people and he will have the added responsibility of exercising it in a way that is righteous and pleasing to God.

A major problem in the charismatic movement is that people tend to assess ministers more by their gifts than by their character. Yet experience has demonstrated time and time again that it is possible for a person to exercise dramatic, impressive gifts and yet have a very defective character. Sometimes such people may even use their gifts to cover up the imperfections of their characters.

There was a minister in a Scandinavian country who preached on the "latter rain" of the Holy Spirit in such a powerful way that people in his congregation actually felt the Holy Spirit falling on them like drops of rain. Yet he went straight out from those services to commit adultery. When he was charged with this, people could not believe that a man who preached like that would commit such a sin – until eventually he acknowledged it himself.

As a young preacher, I greatly admired an older man who had a spectacular ministry of miracles. He also taught very forcefully that it is possible for a Christian to live without ever sinning. Yet eventually he divorced his wife, married his secretary, and died an alcoholic. Other well-known and successful preachers have experienced similar personal tragedies.

When confronted with cases such as these, people often respond, "But surely if a person misuses one of these gifts, God would take it away!"

Yet the answer is No! The gifts of the Spirit are exactly what the name implies – genuine gifts, not loans with conditions attached or a repayment schedule. "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable."⁴

Once we receive one of these gifts, we are free to use it, misuse it or just not use it at all. Ultimately, however, God will require an account of what we have done – or not done.

We need to bear always in mind the warning of Jesus, "You will know them by their fruits"⁵ – not by their gifts.

Jesus followed up these words by an explicit warning that the exercise of spiritual gifts is not necessarily a passport to heaven:

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”⁶

This indicates that it is possible for a person to exercise spiritual gifts and at the same time to “practice lawlessness.” What is “lawlessness”? It is an arrogant assumption that God’s moral and ethical standards no longer apply to those who can exercise gifts of supernatural power.

Obviously, such ministries may at times confront us with the need to make difficult personal decisions. How should we respond?

First of all, we must keep in mind Paul’s warning to Timothy: “Do not . . . share in other people’s sins; keep yourself pure.”⁷

Second, we must also keep in mind the warning which Jesus gave us concerning such unethical ministries: “Heaven is for those who do the will of My Father in heaven.” We each need to ask ourselves: What is the will of God in my life? What does my Father expect of me?

For my part, I feel that God has given me a clear, simple answer: “This is the will of God, that you should be holy.”⁸ To this the Holy Spirit has added a warning: “Without holiness no one will see the Lord.”⁹ It is my determination to “pursue holiness.”

In my next letter, I will deal with the opposite side of the coin: the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Yours in the Master’s service



Derek Prince

¹1 Corinthians 1:6, NIV

²1 Corinthians 13:8-10, NIV

³1 Corinthians 15:19, NIV

⁴Romans 11:29

⁵Matthew 7:20, NAS

⁶Matthew 7:21-23

⁷1 Timothy 5:22

⁸1 Thessalonians 4:3, NKJ & NIV

⁹Hebrews 12:14, NIV

For further study, we recommend audio cassettes

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