

A GIFT IS GIVEN NOT TAKEN!

Today's Text: 1 Cor. 12:1-31

Extracts:

There are *diversities of gifts*, but the same Spirit. There are *differences of ministries*, but the same Lord. And there are *diversities of activities*, but it is the same God who works all in all. *But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all*; for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit; to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healings, by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. *But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills* [1 Cor. 12: 4-11]

In Jackson, the capital of the State of Mississippi, USA, potholes are widespread.¹ The city has a pothole line that residents can call to report damaged roads. On July 1, 2013, Chokwe Lumbaba was elected Mayor on a promise to arrest the deteriorating state of the city's infrastructures, delayed by budget constraints. However, one resident, Ron Chane, dubbed the 'pothole Robin Hood,' had his own approach to dealing with the problem. He would take asphalt from the city's Department of Transportation (DOT) and fill in potholes on the streets. After each repair, he would put the sign, "citizen fixed." As far as he was concerned, he was doing nothing wrong. But the police was not amused and was investigating the matter. In his reaction, the Mayor said that his administration would not accept any use of the city's resources without going through the proper legal channels.

Chane may have done a commendable thing to fix bad roads in the city that he loved. However, he took and used resources that did not belong to him without the owner's permission. In other words, a gift is given, not taken. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are like that. They belong to God, not to believers that parade themselves as prophets or healers and the like. How many of such people are 'Spiritual gift Robin Hoods,' laying claim to gifts that God has not given them? Let us learn more on the subject, based on Paul's treatise to the Corinthian church on the right exercise of spiritual gifts.

¹ Story is based on the following sources: Geetika Rudra, "'Pothole Robin Hood' Steals Asphalt, Fixes Potholes," *ABC Good Morning America*, Wed., Jul. 10, 2013, <http://gma.yahoo.com/pothole-robinhood-steals-asphalt-fixes-potholes-203125413--abc-news-topstories.html> ; and "'Pothole Robin Hood' Steals Asphalt, Fixes Potholes in Mississippi," *ABC News Radio Online*, Thur., Jul. 11, 2012, <http://www.wmal.com/common/page.php?pt=%27Pothole+Robin+Hood%27+Steals+Asphalt%2C+Fixes+Potholes+in+Mississippi&id=33363&is Corp=0>

1. Background: Separating the called from the thieves!

During Paul's third missionary journey, reported in the book of the Acts [Chapters 18-21], he came to Ephesus. There, "God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them" [Acts 19: 11-12]. Some Jewish exorcists who saw the power of God in Paul then decided to achieve a similar feat. They called on the name of Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "We exorcise you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." Among those trying out such a "trick" were the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest. But the evil spirit they were trying to exorcise replied them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" The man in whom was that evil spirit leapt on the exorcists and overpowered them. They fled out of that house naked and wounded [vv. 14-16]!

An important lesson that we learn from that story is that *the reported miracles were not performed by Paul but through him*. Secondly, Paul was given the power because, as Nicodemus once told Jesus, "No one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him" [Jn 3: 2]. So, *why do we use the gifts and privileges that God has endowed us with as if we have the ability to pick and choose or switch them on and off according to our whims and caprices?* We hear the expression, "anointed man/woman of God," used glibly in our congregations. What does it really mean?

In this week's Bible verses, Paul has told us emphatically that it is the Holy Spirit that distributes spiritual gifts to individuals "*as He wills*" [1 Cor. 12: 11]. *How many of the miracle workers and prophets in our congregations today have been so called? How many of those who speak so fluently in tongues are actually operating under the unction of the Holy Spirit? How can we separate the usurpers and thieves from the truly called and chosen? Those and more are the questions that this week's study will attempt to answer.*

It is important to understand quite clearly, as Paul began to say in the opening verses of the chapter under focus, that "no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and *no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit*" [vv. 1-3]. In other words, whatever talents or gifts that you have received from the Holy Spirit are in furtherance of the mission of Jesus the Christ- to be His witnesses near and far, even "to the end of the earth" [Acts 1: 8]. So, to ensure that we are not ignorant of that purpose, Paul laid out for us how true ministry is closely tied to our exercise of spiritual gifts. In that light, we should pay attention to the following:

a) *The diversities of gifts*

Paul wrote, "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit" [1 Cor. 12: 4]. God loves variety! You just take one part of a worship session in your

place of worship and you will be amazed how many talents and gifts are being exhibited there. For example, the choir alone has multiple talents being blended harmoniously for God's glory. A good example of such harmony can be found in the temple at Jerusalem when King Solomon brought there the Ark of the Covenant. We are told:

And the Levites who were the singers, ... stood at the east end of the altar, clothed in white linen, having cymbals, stringed instruments and harps, and with them one hundred and twenty priests sounding with trumpets- indeed it came to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD, and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the LORD,... that the house of the Lord was filled with a cloud ... for the glory of the LORD filled the house of God [2 Chron. 5: 11-14].

It follows that in whatever we excel in life, it is God that has given us the talents. We could not have got them ourselves from own effort, no matter how hard we work or how keenly we desire them.

b) The differences of ministries and diversities of activities

Paul added, "There are diversities of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all" [1 Cor. 12: 5-6]. Today, the number of ministries and activities in the Christian community worldwide appears uncountable! Missionaries from the developing world are now ministering in the so-called advanced countries of Europe and North America. In most congregations, members are engaged in activities where they are exercising their God-given talents.

Take the Biblical example of a certain disciple called Dorcas at Joppa that was said to be "full of good works and charitable deeds." She fell sick and died. The disciples there sent for Peter who was in a nearby city. When he came, "all the widows stood by him weeping, showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them" [Acts 9: 36-39]. She had used her sewing skills to benefit the spread of the gospel. In like manner, we have good cleaners and gardeners, record keepers and other helpers who are, in the sight of God, as important as the pastors and prophets, teachers and top administrators that dominate the headlines.

c) The manifestation of the Spirit

Paul wrote, "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all" [1 Cor. 12: 7]. In other words, no matter the talents God has given us or the activities/ministries we are involved in, the manifestation

of the Holy Spirit can be summarised under nine gifts, namely, *wisdom, knowledge, faith, healings, miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, different kinds of tongues and interpretation of tongues* [vv. 8-10].

Manifestation is at God's instance and for His purpose. For example, on Pentecost Day, the Holy Spirit manifested Himself in the disciples as follows[**Acts 2:4-6**]:

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven [and] everyone heard them speak in his own language .

After God had shown Moses how to make the tabernacle, He added, "I have called by name Bezalel... and ***I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge***, and in all manner of workmanship, to design artistic works, to work in gold, in silver, in bronze...jewels [and] wood" [**Ex. 31: 1-5**].

In conclusion, Paul has reminded believers that they are the body of Christ, "and members individually." In the church, God has appointed apostles, followed by prophets, teachers, miracles (workers of), gifts of healings, helps, administrations and various tongues[**1 Cor. 12: 27-28**]. Therefore, it is important that we learn the right lessons from Paul's treatise.

2. Lessons for the modern believer

Here are some important lessons that we can take away from this week's study:

a) *Desire but don't covet Spiritual gifts*

Paul asks, "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?" [v. 29]. The answer to each of those questions is, of course, "No!" That is why he concludes, "But earnestly desire the best gifts" [v.30].

To desire, as used here, does not mean to want or to covet. By definition, a truly born -again person is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and can, therefore, see the kingdom of God [**Jn 3: 3, 1 Cor. 3: 19**]. In that sense, the Holy Spirit is the Internet Provider to enable you to do God's work. Jesus said to His disciples, "If you love Me, keep My commandments, and I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever- the Spirit of truth ... for ***He dwells with you and will be in you***" [**Jn 14: 15-17**]. That is an indication that you should desire to be

called and used for God's call or work. For example, when Isaiah saw a vision of God and heard Him call for whom to send, Isaiah said, "Here am I! Send me" [Is. 6: 1-8]. Nevertheless, it is not every soldier that is enlisted that is sent to battle. Many may be called but few are chosen [Matt. 22: 14]. *It is the prerogative of the Holy Spirit to choose vessels to use and in how to manifest Himself through them.*

So, if you desire the best Spiritual gifts, make yourself a holy vessel. Eschew sexual immorality and idolatrous pursuits. Make yourself available to do God's work and He will endow you with the gifts that you need. Otherwise, your desire may be out of unholy motives [Jam. 4: 1-3]. Whoever takes what s(he) has not been given is a thief or usurper! Whoever covets to use God's gifts for own selfish ends is an agent of Satan.

b) Wait to be empowered from above

We may desire Spiritual gifts and take steps to be spiritually ready; but *the timing remains in God's hands*. For example, as Jesus was about to ascend into heaven, He told His disciples, "Behold, I send the Promise of My Father [i.e., the Holy Spirit] upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high" [Lk 24: 49]. They (about 120 in number) returned to Jerusalem as commanded and "all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers" [Acts 1: 12-14]. The Holy Spirit came unexpectedly ten days later on the Day of Pentecost [Acts 2: 1-4]. Nobody was exempted from waiting!

Unfortunately, many of us today start buying chairs and looking for a worship hall the day they receive a prophetic word that they will be called to pastor or evangelise! We need a maturation period. We may not even know in advance until the day we are called. For example, even when it was prophesied before his birth that he would be Christ's forerunner, the Holy Spirit did not come on John the Baptist until he was about thirty years old [Lk 1: 13-17; cp Lk 1: 80 with Lk 3: 23]. Amos was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet. He was a full-time sheep breeder and a tender of sycamore fruit when God anointed him a prophet [Amos 7: 14-15]. Only God knows when to call us and which gifts to bestow to make us fruitful labourers in His vineyard.

c) Use them only for God's glory

The most influential members of our congregations today are those who are highly gifted, especially prophets and healers. It is, therefore, not surprising that those are the most counterfeited gifts also. However, it is most advisable to use our spiritual endowments only for God's glory.

Take the case of King Saul. After his anointing by the prophet Samuel, God gave him another heart and as he came among a group of prophets, “the Spirit of God came upon him and he prophesied among them” [1 Sam. 10: 1-11]. But after he had disobeyed God, David was anointed in his place and “the *Spirit of the LORD* departed from Saul, and a distressing *spirit from the LORD* troubled him” [1 Sam. 16: 14]. The Spirit of the Lord is the Holy Spirit; the spirit from the Lord is a tormenting spirit. Can you then imagine how many fallen prophets in our midst are pretending to remain prophets of God when they may now actually be using demonic spirits? Think!

In sum, believers are best known by their fruits. False prophets may seduce you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. So, false profession, such as prophesying or casting out demons or performing wonders in Jesus’ name will not suffice on Judgment Day. Those who will enter the kingdom of heaven are those who do God’s will [Matt. 7: 21-23]. *Desire spiritual gifts but use them only to glorify God. That is Paul’s message to all believers from this week’s study.*

3. Conclusion: It was Jesus that chose you!

Jesus has said, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you” [Jn 15: 16]. Without the Holy Spirit, you cannot see Jesus as your Lord and Saviour; and without Jesus, you cannot be a son of God His Father. Therefore, it is better to wait and receive from Jesus the gifts of the Holy Spirit instead of trying to steal them under false disguises.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are given, not taken.