

Discovering Your Spiritual Gifts

INTRODUCTION TO SPIRITUAL GIFTS

One of the ways God equips His people to be His hands and feet in our world is through supernaturally bestowing each of them with “spiritual gifts” (also called “gifts of grace,” “spirituals,” “gifts of the Spirit,” “manifestations of the Spirit,” or “gifts for service” elsewhere in the New Testament). Our simple definition of spiritual gifts is this: “Holy Spirit-empowered abilities given freely to each of His people as He sees fit for maturing the church community as a whole.” Let’s examine each phrase of this definition in turn.

First, they are “Holy Spirit-empowered abilities.” The New Testament mentions around twenty particular gifts, though most scholars agree that the lists given aren’t meant to be understood as exhaustive. There are potentially countless gifts the Lord gives to His church! Sometimes there is debate over whether we should think of these gifts as predominantly new God-given abilities that wholly develop after faith in Jesus or, on the other hand, as something like “sanctified natural talents” whereby God takes abilities that belonged to people *before* conversion but begins to use them for helping the church mature *after* conversion. It is probably best to make space in our understanding for both. Another debate centers around whether the gifts are to be thought of as permanently available to those who are gifted or whether they come and go as God wills. The New Testament seems to provide examples of both with an emphasis on the kinds of permanent, abiding gifts that remain with people for their whole lives. Here are the gifts mentioned in the New Testament’s three main lists (with duplicates removed):

- Ephesians 4:11
 - **Apostleship** - the eye-witnesses of the risen Jesus specifically empowered and commissioned by Him; possibly a gift for entrepreneurial ministry of the gospel like church planting missionaries
 - **Prophecy** - the gift of receiving and communicating direct revelation from God
 - **Evangelism** - the gift of special effectiveness in sharing the good news of Jesus with others
 - **Shepherding** - the gift for pastoring people through care, oversight, and communication of God’s word
 - **Teaching** - the gift for special ability to explain and apply God’s word in various contexts
- 1 Corinthians 12:8-10
 - **Utterance of wisdom or knowledge** - Possibly the gift of receiving messages from God for the purpose of speaking wisdom and knowledge, probably for specific situations. Possibly the gift of generally possessing wisdom or knowledge.
 - **Faith** – the gift of special trust, vision, or expectancy to do something
 - **Gifts of healing** – various gifts for healing disease or infirmity
 - **Working of miracles** - a broad category of gifts that probably includes healing, but also things like nature miracles, exorcisms, etc.

- **Distinguishing between the spirits** - the gift for being able to discern between the Spirit of God and other spirits, between truth and falsehood
- **Tongues** - various gifts for supernaturally speaking languages unknown to the speaker including human and angelic languages, spoken both privately in prayer and corporately with interpretation
- **Interpretation of tongues** - the gift of interpreting and sharing someone else's gift of tongues
- **Romans 12:6-8:**
 - **Service** – the gifts of aptitude at various kinds of assistance and support to Christians
 - **Exhortation** – the gift for speaking encouragement, comfort, and consolation to others
 - **Contribution** – the gift of capacity and willingness to share one's finances and possessions with the church community
 - **Leadership** – the gift of wisdom and vision for leading others and the ability to garner trust
 - **Mercy** – the gift of skill and passion for caring for people in need, distress, or grief

Second, spiritual gifts are “freely given to each of His people as He sees fit.” In 1 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul places a big emphasis on the one Spirit who supplies these gifts according to His will and how all are necessary for churches to find health. His point is that these are given (not earned) according to God's purposes, which protects us from two temptations. On one hand, we are protected from thinking too highly of ourselves and our giftings. No matter how gifted we are, no matter how much our particular gifts are valued by our communities relative to others... our gifts do not make us self-sufficient. Every part needs the rest of the body of Christ. On the other hand, we are protected from thinking too lowly of ourselves. Even when we are tempted to view our gifts as too mundane or unimportant, Paul reminds us that God values things very differently than we tend to, and that even the most under-appreciated gifts are crucial to the health of the church. If God gives the gifts according to His will, we can each find great humility and great value in this truth.

Third, they are “for maturing the church community as a whole.” The gifts are not primarily for our own individual encouragement or growth—they are for the benefit of those around us. In Ephesians 4, Paul writes that the leadership gifts he's just described are given “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...” This outward focus applies to all of the gifts—they are given to see the whole church grow into maturity after Jesus. The complementary interplay between every part, working together, is part of what makes a healthy, thriving church community. To begin speaking of the spiritual gifts is to begin speaking of community.

If this is true, it means every disciple of Jesus has some work to do! We all have to take up the task of discovering, celebrating, and exercising our spiritual gifts—whatever they are—for the good of our sisters and brothers. For some, this process will result in leaning into formal roles in your church where your gifts can be expressed. For others, it will all take place exclusively in the organic spaces of relationships as we go. In either case and every one in between, as we begin to faithfully use our gifts we'll be allowing the Spirit to make our communities a little bit more like Jesus. This document is meant to help Christians begin or continue a process of discovering your gifts. It will include ideas for how to examine where you might be

gifted through prayerful individual reflection, in conversation and with feedback from your community, and through trial and error. It will conclude with a reminder that both discovering your gifts and using them effectively and responsibly is a byproduct of holistic spiritual growth and formation. We recommend you take at least two weeks to explore each section of this process, returning daily to write down further reflections, engage in more conversations, and so on. Don't rush. That said, let's jump in!

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

- *The Spirit & His Gifts* teaching series at Door of Hope Northeast

RECOMMENDED READING

- *Baptism & Fullness* by John Stott
- *Spirit & Sacrament* by Andrew Wilson
- *Everyday Supernatural* by Mike Pilavachi & Andy Croft
- *Showing the Spirit* by D.A. Carson

PRAYERFUL PERSONAL REFLECTION

We begin with prayer. This is how we make sure we're inviting God to direct this process. Over two weeks or so, we encourage you to make time daily to pray through at least four things:

First, pray a prayer of thanksgiving. Give God thanks that He has saved you through the work of Jesus. Thank Him that apart from how He's gifted you, how effectively you have or haven't leaned into your gifts, or anything else—you stand secure as His redeemed, forgiven, beloved child. Then, thank Him for the fact that He *has* empowered and gifted you through the work of the Holy Spirit. Even if you have no idea how you're gifted, you can begin by standing in gratitude on the promise that He in fact has gifted every one of his children. There is much to celebrate, so celebrate it with our God.

Second, pray a prayer asking for clarity. Petition God to reveal to you how He has gifted you. Tell Him that you don't want to try to force gifts into existence (as if we even could!). Tell Him that you don't want to pretend or fabricate a particular gift. Tell Him that you desire to develop and share what He has given you to help your brothers and sisters. Ask Him to make it abundantly clear—through whatever process He chooses—what your particular role is to play, what your contribution is to make.

Third, pray for open doors. If you have hunches or suspicions about giftings, or even desires related to particular gifts, share them with God. Ask Him to provide you with those gifts. Ask Him to provide you with opportunities to exercise those gifts. This might sound like it contradicts our previous prayer, but the tension is one common to all sincere prayer. Like Jesus in Gethsemane, we share our wills with God even as we finally state "not my will, but yours." This leads us to one more prayer...

Fourth, pray for contentment with whatever He ultimately reveals. Pray that we would learn to dignify all of the gifts the same way that he does. Pray that we would have a genuine excitement about our gifts, recognizing them for the graces that they are—whatever they are. Pray for peace and joy throughout this process.

Following your daily prayer time, we encourage you to spend time reflecting and journaling in response to a few questions:

First, what are your passions in life? Separate from questions around ministry and church life, what gets you excited? What do you like to spend your time doing? What produces joy? What kinds of things serve as active reminders of the goodness and generosity of God?

Second, what are your passions in church? What aspects of worship gatherings, community groups, and service opportunities (or whatever else!) are most engaging and encouraging to you? What church activities do you find yourself most looking forward to?

Third, where are places you've served (either inside or outside the church) with joy and fruitfulness? What things have you done that have given you great enjoyment? What have you discovered has come naturally to you? What have you noticed you've had a noticeable amount of skill doing? What things have felt like second nature?

Fourth, what are some areas of your life that have received noticeable amounts of encouragement, affirmation, or celebration? What skills or activities have prompted the most positive feedback from people you know?

As you begin writing down your thoughts, the bulk will likely come out in the first couple of days. But make space to let further insights and ideas come out (and get written down) over these weeks. It might be that some of the most important discoveries you make are not the ones that came most quickly or naturally. Remember not to let this process become disconnected from prayer. Keep asking God to direct your reflection.

After at least two weeks of prayerful reflection, move on to the next step.

CONSULT YOUR COMMUNITY

This is probably the most pragmatically helpful part of this process. If God has designed the spiritual gifts to function in and for community, then community must surely be one of the most important aspects of discovering the gifts to begin with. Self-reflection is an important part of this process, but we all know how easily self-deception can occur. Our communities bring much needed outside perspective (including both affirmation and correction). Don't discount God's ability to guide you through wise, trusted, Spirit-filled people who know and love you.

At this point, we suggest reaching out to at least three well-known, trusted, spiritually mature people with different perspectives on your life. If you don't have someone in your life that fits one of these categories (for example, maybe you don't have a parent or a sibling that's a believer), reach out to an additional person from one of the other categories.

A family member - Our families typically have a kind of insight into our lives that no one else has. Parents and siblings have observed us for our entire lives. They've seen us at our least polished and performative. They've seen our qualities that have been consistent over time. They've seen how we've grown and changed. If they're believers, they can be an invaluable source of insight about potential spiritual gifts.

A long-term friend - Similarly to families, these people can have a long view of our lives, passions, and skills that few others do.

A spiritual mentor or ministry overseer - If someone has been mentoring or discipling you for a while, they've hopefully been given a very unique window into your spiritual life. If someone has been working alongside or leading you in some ministry or service opportunity, they too probably have special insight.

With each of these people, simply explain that you're working on trying to discern some of the ways you've been gifted and that you want to let your community weigh in throughout the process. Ask them if they'd be willing to answer a few questions. Ask them to be honest. Meet up if possible or do a phone call if not. Here's a baseline of things to ask them: **Are there any clear spiritual gifts you see in me? What do you think are my biggest skills? In what ways have I been most helpful or encouraging to you? What are some things you've seen me try to do that seemed outside of my skill set? Where in the church could you imagine me most effectively serving?** Write down the responses you're given.

We also suggest making space in your community group for mutual encouragement around spiritual gifts. If the group is willing, after at least 4 months together, the group leaders can lead out into a time (this could take multiple group meetings) of letting each member of the group have time in the "hot seat" where the rest of the group speak affirmations of the places they see the grace of God at work in their lives, including

potential spiritual gifts. These relationships in your small group may or may not be among your closest, but even if not, this is an extremely valuable context for learning about yourself.

Following each of these interactions, journal the responses you received. People aren't infallible so pray that God would help you discern the truth in what was shared. Pray for humility and receptiveness toward things that may be discouraging but true. Pray for humility and receptiveness toward things that are encouraging, as well.

TRIAL AND ERROR

This is a far more long-term part of the process than the others discussed so far, but another important part of discerning your gifts is to simply get out there and try some things out. At this point, you might have a couple of leads that you can follow. If there is some opportunity already organized within the church that overlaps with your suspected gifts, consider signing up to serve! There may be opportunities that exist that aren't exactly in line with your gifts, but are close enough to be a meaningful avenue (for example, if you're exploring a gift of prophecy or healing, a prayer team could be an excellent avenue that doesn't require reinventing the wheel). If there isn't a ministry in place but you have an idea, speak with someone about starting something (even if only for a few months).

If your potential gifts don't seem to lend themselves to a more "formal" service opportunity, consider trying to use them in ways that don't require a specific role. For example, if you think you might have the gift of exhortation or encouragement but don't see a particular "ministry role" that would utilize it the way you envision, consider getting coffee with one person per week who you have a word of encouragement for and just share it with them. Don't assume an overly-programmatic view of how these things must play out. You'd be surprised how meaningful this kind of organic ministry is to the people who receive it!

To put this into practice, **brainstorm at least two "programmatic" places you might serve and explore your gifts and at least two "organic" opportunities.** After praying over them, take the plunge by picking one to start doing. Commit for at least a few months and see what emerges! We recommend journaling along the way as you gain insights from your experiences.

CONCLUSION: PURSUE HOLISTIC GROWTH

It can be tempting to think of pursuing spiritual gifts as a singular pursuit disconnected from other elements of your Christian life. You might assume that you could pursue a process of discernment without paying much attention to the rest of your life with Jesus. Fight against this idea! Instead, remember that discovering your gifts is one part of the holistic process of growing into Christian maturity. If you're not abiding in Christ, growing in love for Him, yielding more of yourself to him, you're like a branch dying apart from the vine (John 15).

As you're seeking clarity around your spiritual gifts, make sure that you're pursuing God individually and in community. Commit to worshiping and learning alongside your local church, commit to fostering space for prayer, commit to regular engagement with the Scriptures, commit to sharing the good news with others, commit to service and generosity and confession. Growing in Christ in general will surely bring focus and power to your spiritual gifts, both in their discovery and in their use.

In the end, remember that following the process outlined here isn't a silver bullet. The goal is to get you to process through prayer, communal conversations, and practical experience with attentive reflection. If you feel stuck, remember the grace of Christ. He loves you wherever you are in relation to your spiritual gifts. Feel free to take a break from this process and come back later. This is a lifelong process that we can and should return to over and over again to discover how God has wired us to contribute to the life of his church.