

A COMMENTARY ON THE APOSTLE PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

According to the Homilies of St. John Chrysostom and other Fathers of the Church

by
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Chapter Twelve

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Gifts of the Holy Spirit

BACKGROUND: God showered the early Church with many miracles and manifestations of the Holy Spirit because they were needed. Jesus chose only twelve Apostles, yet he commissioned this small group to bring the Gospel to all of the then known world (Mt 28:19-20), a formidable task. Communities were far apart and there was no reliable means of communication between them; they did not have the New Testament to use as a tool as we do; teaching had to be done in person, or by means of a letter (epistle) sent with a traveler; and false teachers and teachings were rampant. So God provided supernatural assistance!

Whoever was baptized immediately spoke with tongues...many also prophesied, and some also performed many other wonderful works. For since on their coming over from idols, without any clear knowledge or training in the ancient Scriptures, they at once on their baptism received the Spirit, yet the Spirit they saw not, for It is invisible; therefore God's grace bestowed some sensible proof of that energy. And one immediately spoke in the Persian, another in the Roman, another in the Indian, another in some other such tongue: and this made it clear to everyone that it was the Spirit speaking in the person. CHRYSOSTOM¹

This abundance of gifts among the Christians of Corinth was causing much jealousy and division among them:

. . . inasmuch as many used even to raise the dead and to cast out devils and to perform many other such wonders. And they had gifts too, some less, and some more. But more abundant than all was the gift of tongues among them. However, this became a cause of division, not from the nature of the gift but from the perversity of those who had received it: on the one hand, the possessors of the greater gifts were lifted up against those who had the lesser: and these were grieved and envied the owners of the greater. CHRYSOSTOM²

12:1-2. Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that you were Gentiles, carried away to these dumb idols, however you were led. As pagans, the Corinthians were accustomed to the worship of idols. Paul warns them not to allow the spiritual gifts they have received to become idols themselves, by putting their emphasis on the gifts rather than on the One who had bestowed them. Worship belongs to God alone.

12:3. Therefore I make known to you 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. The proliferation of spiritual gifts among them created a supernatural atmosphere and gave magicians and soothsayers, who were very common among eastern nations, an opportunity to try to capitalize on the frenzy (Acts 8:9-24). This verse focuses on how to know the difference between prophecy, which is a gift from God, and soothsaying, which is the equivalent of fortune telling/witchcraft, and has always been against God's law (Lev 20:6). It is important to be able to distinguish between the two, so as not to be led astray. It was for this reason that the gift of discernment was given. (For more on this gift, see this study for 2 Cor 10.)

Prophets teach, counsel and comfort God's people in the name of Jesus Christ. A prophet also occasionally discloses what is going to take place in the future (see this study for 1 Cor 14:1-4). However, true prophecy cannot be proved at the time it is given when it foretells future events, so

it is easy to be fooled by a false prophet. Soothsayers are filled with "lying spirits" (1 Kings 22:22) because they are tools of the Devil. They curse (Gr: anathematize) the name of Jesus by denying that He is the Son of God, the promised Messiah.

...to cause distraction and madness and great darkness is the proper work of a demon: but it is God's work to illuminate and with consideration to teach things needful. This then is the *first difference* between a soothsayer and a prophet. CHRYSOSTOM³

...a *second difference* is what Paul states in verse 3: "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." *Chrysostom* adds: "...without being scourged."⁴

In other words: (1) God's prophets only foretell and teach those things that are necessary for living the life of holiness in preparation for entrance into the Kingdom, ultimately the only thing in this life that really matters. (2) God's prophets would not denounce Jesus or pronounce prophecy without using His Name. Anyone who dared to use Jesus' Name insincerely, without being guided by the Holy Spirit, would sooner or later reveal his true nature—and will receive due justice, in this life and/or the next.

In order to discern the difference between fortune tellers and prophets, it is necessary to grow in understanding of God's divine plan, as revealed in Scripture. We know He does not want us to know the future (Mt 24:36, 1 Thess 5:1-2, Rev 3:3) because He wants us to live in readiness for Christ's Second Coming at all times. Thus we should have no dealings with those who claim to have knowledge of coming events. Also, those who truly have power from God to enlighten as to the work of God in the future would not do so for money, power, or fame.

12:4-6. Now 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. Ministries and activities of God all come from the same Godhead, the Holy Trinity. He who thinks that the gift/s he has received are of lesser value than those received by others must remember that a gift is something that is given—not owed. He who has received what he thinks is a highly valued gift must remember the giver of the gift and the fact that *for everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required* (Lk 12:48). Serious contemplation of these truths will prevent both envy and conceit.

12:7. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: God gives His gifts to individuals not for their personal gain but for the good of the whole Body of Christ, the Church.

12:8-10. ...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 workings of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. The person who has the gift of wisdom is able to grow in understanding of the ways of God and to explain them to others. S/he who has the gift of knowledge can pass on facts about the life of Christ, his teachings, etc. He with the gift of rock-like faith is so certain that God is in control, loves us, and has prepared a place for us in His Kingdom that he bases his decisions and his life on those truths and inspires faith in those around

him. Those with the gift of healing diseases through Christ—like many of the Saints (and the modern-day St. Nectarios)—can ease much suffering. Others can perform miracles (they do happen!), others to prophesy, or to discern spirits (be able to know the difference between the work of God's Holy Spirit and evil spirits). Others may speak in tongues, heavenly and earthly; while still others can interpret those languages, to make that which they impart meaningful (see this study for 1 Cor 14).

12:11. *But the one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.* The Holy Spirit distributes spiritual gifts according to God's will in the same manner as physical gifts are distributed to the human body.

12:12-13. *For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.* It was a fact of the early Church that everyone who was baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19) was thus a part of the Church—there was only one. Then through the laying on of hands (Acts 8:14-17), the baptized received the one Holy Spirit (Chrismation). Thus, just as the human body is made up of many individual parts, the Body of Christ is made up of many individual Christians, no matter to which local church they belong.

12:14-20. *For in fact, the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body”, is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body.* As each part of the human body has a different gift or function as designed by God, for the purpose of doing all the things that a whole body can do, so too, each Christian is given different gifts or functions by God, for the purpose of doing all the things that the Church as a whole can do and be. The Holy Spirit brings all of these elements together as the Body of Christ.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (a) God reaches out to teach great truths by hiding important lessons in the events of our lives. When do we most fully realize the lesson of the importance of each part of the body?

12:21-25. *And 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.” No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another.* What one part of the body lacks in strength or comeliness is balanced by its indispensable qualities. The hands and the feet rush to protect the eyes and ears from danger because of their importance to the quality of life. The inner organs are generally not even visible but they are more essential than the parts that are more evident and more beautiful.

God distributed among the members of the body advantages and drawbacks, so that neither the inferior would hate the superior nor the superior spurn the inferior but rather take care of them than their own selves.⁵

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (b). How do these verses apply to the Church?

12:26-27. *And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually.* Following the example of the physical body, the individual members of the spiritual Body of Christ, the Church, should be neither conceited about nor embarrassed by their individual functions but should use their gifts from God with love, working always for the good of the entire Church.

Just as the entire physical body suffers if one of its parts is in pain, and rejoices if one of its members has occasion, as through healing or accomplishment, so too, the entire Body of Christ should share the sufferings and the joys of each of its individual members.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (c). How can we share the joys and sorrows of fellow Christians?

12:28-30. *And God has appointed these in the Church: first Apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all Apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?* All spiritual gifts contribute to the quality of life and work of the Church, but some are more crucial to its existence than others. Just as the physical body cannot function at all without vital organs such as the heart and brain, the Church cannot function at all without Apostles (Bishops, Priests), who provide access to the Sacraments, the tools that help us begin and continue our walk with Christ. Next in order of importance because of their vital functions are prophets who proclaim the message of God, then teachers who pass on an understanding of the will and word of God. Only then come workers of miracles, then those who have the gifts of healing, then those who help others, then administrators, and finally, those who speak in tongues.

Notice that while all gifts from God are valuable to the Church, those that top the list are the ones having to do with helping others in their spiritual life, which is eternal, rather than those having to do with the physical aspects of life.

12:31. *But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.* Just as physical exercise can expand the capacity and endurance of the human body, spiritual exercise such as prayer, fasting, participation in the Sacraments, study of Scripture and practice in living a Christ-like life can expand a person's spiritual qualities. Each of us should pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and try to stretch ourselves to acquire the higher gifts. As with all aspects of God's divine plan, He works in cooperation with man. The Parable of the Talents teaches that if we make good use of God's gifts, He showers us with more (Mt 25:14-30).

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: (d). Have you developed your gift(s) from God and determined how to use them in His service?

Paul's next topic is God's greatest gift: love.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT COMMENTS

(a) God reaches out to teach great truths by hiding important lessons in the events of our lives. When do we most fully realize the lesson of the importance of each part of the body? Byproducts of life in this imperfect world to which Adam and Eve were exiled after their disobedience are the possibilities of illness, accidents, injury from others, and of being born with imperfections. These occurrences can cause much physical, emotional, and psychological pain, but God allows us to experience them so we can get a taste of that to which estrangement from Him (expulsion from the Garden of Eden—that perfect place) leads. The physical difficulties that are a part of the human experience also teach us to appreciate the wonder and amazing intricacy of God's ultimate creation: man.

If we injure our little finger, we realize how often we require the use of that member of our body. When we suffer impairment to a vital body part, we realize that we had taken many blessings for granted. Who among us has seen a person handicapped in some way and not been reminded of many personal blessings, which would probably escape our notice if some were not allowed to bear the burden of being living lessons of the miracle of life in a marvelously complex, fully-functioning body. When those who serve this special purpose in the world turn to God for strength, we see another phenomenon: He fills their hearts with such love and inner joy, in spite of their outward circumstances, that that too becomes a lesson, for *the Lord is near to the broken-hearted* (Ps 34:18).

(b). How does the precept of the importance of each part of the body apply to the Church? As the hand cannot cut off the foot without causing pain, suffering, and loss of fullness of life to the entire body, the Church needs each of its members. To lose one is to lose fullness of function and should cause pain. A Priest is necessary to celebrate the Divine Liturgy but so is the person who bakes the prosphora and brings the wine, the altar boy and parish council member who assist, and each member of the congregation who brings a different urgent prayer and a different emphasis on thanksgiving and worship to God. Each Christian who reaches out with love and concern to those within and without the Church does important work for the Kingdom.

Just as there should be no war among the parts of the physical body, there also should be no antagonism in the Church. He who would ignore all parts of his body except one or two would be extremely foolish. If he were to spend his life, for instance, concentrating only on being an eye, and doing and appreciating only what an eye can do, imagine the great tragedy—the waste—of not doing all that he could do or being all that he could be if he appreciated and cooperated with all parts of his body. As the physical body would be commensurately deprived without the diversity of gifts each of its members possesses, so too would the Church be deprived without the diversity of gifts at hand through each of its members. This is according to God's design, so that we may learn to depend upon and to have love and concern for each other.

Great also is the tragedy of a fragmented Church, one which does not live, teach and embody the fullness of Christ's teachings as a whole but instead emphasizes only one or two of them. A divided Church delights Satan because it dilutes the great power she would have if all her members, all Christians, were united. (See this study for 1 Cor 1:10-13 & Food For Thought

questions (i)-(j).)

(c). How can we share the joys and sorrows of fellow Christians? Joys shared are multiplied and sorrows shared are divided. When we show fellow Christians that we care about the things that are happening in their lives, we help them celebrate their joys and carry their burdens.

We can pray for help in overcoming any jealousy we might feel so that we can sincerely rejoice with those who have made advancement of any sort, and we can pray for and reach out to help those who are in need. Sometimes just a note showing concern can remind the receiver of God's love and can give that little extra strength needed to surmount the insurmountable. God has promised to be with His people to help them through the difficulties of life, but most often His presence is manifested through one of us.

(d). Have you developed your gift(s) from God and determined how to use them in His service? Everyone has a gift or gifts from God that can be used for the good of the universal Church. In fact, every situation in which we find ourselves should be considered a gift from God that we can use for His glory. Those who have yet to discover what their individual special gifts are and how they may be used, should ask, in prayer, for His help (Lk 11:9), and should remain open to and excited about possibilities.

All of us ought always to give thanks to God for both the *universal* and the particular gifts of soul and body that He bestows on us. The universal gifts consist of the four elements and all that comes into being through them, as well as all the marvelous works of God mentioned in the divine Scriptures. The *particular* gifts consist of all that God has given to each individual. These include wealth, so that one can perform acts of charity; poverty, so that one can endure it with patience and gratitude; authority, so that one can exercise righteous judgment and establish virtue; obedience and service, so that one can more readily attain salvation of soul; health, so that one can assist those in need and undertake work worthy of God; sickness, so that one may earn the crown of patience; spiritual knowledge and strength, so that one may acquire virtue; weakness and ignorance, so that, turning one's back on worldly things, one may be under obedience in stillness and humility; unsought loss of goods and possessions, so that one may deliberately seek to be saved and may be helped when incapable of shedding all one's possessions or even of giving alms; ease and prosperity, so that one may voluntarily struggle and suffer to attain the virtues and thus become dispassionate and fit to save other souls; trials and hardship, so that those who cannot eradicate their own will may be saved in spite of themselves, and those capable of joyful endurance may attain perfection. All these things, even if they are opposed to each other, are nevertheless good when used correctly; but when misused they are not good, but are harmful for both soul and body.

Better than them all, however, is the patient endurance of afflictions. He who has been found worthy of this great gift should give thanks to God in that he has been all the more blessed, for he has become an imitator of Christ, of His holy Apostles, and of the martyrs and saints. He has received from God great strength and spiritual knowledge, so that he may voluntarily abstain from pleasure and may readily embrace hardship through the eradication of his own will and his rejection of unholy thoughts and may thus always do and think that which is in accordance with God's will. Those who have been found worthy of using things as they ought to be used should in all humility give heartfelt thanks to God, for by His grace they have been freed from what is contrary to nature and from the transgression of the commandments. We, however, who are still subject to the passions

and who still misuse things, and who, therefore, act in a manner that is contrary to nature, should tremble and in all gratitude should give heartfelt thanks to our Benefactor, astonished at His unutterable forbearance, in that though we have disobeyed His commandments, misused His creation, and rejected His gifts, He endures our ingratitude and does not cease to confer His blessings on us, waiting until our last breath for our conversion and repentance.

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¹ Schaff, "Homily XXIX," Vol. XII, p.168.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*, p.170.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Makrakis, p.1479.

⁶ Palmer, vol. Three, p.172.