

Gifts of the Spirit, Grace to Serve
A Guided Bible Study

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Introduction

Importance, and a preview of our study

Imagine ... What would it be like if Jesus joined your church's ministry team? How amazing would that be?!

I think I'd start by inviting the Lord to get involved with hospital visitation. What a stir He would create! A healing here, a healing there, raise a few people from the dead—before you know it, everyone would want Him to come and see them, and the whole hospital staff would be talking about the guy from *that* church. Even if He decided that this isn't the time to heal every sickness, I'm confident that Jesus' visits would be a welcome source of encouragement and comfort. Of course we'd sign Him up for that ministry!

But that's just the beginning. I'm sure we would immediately rearrange our education ministry so that we could have Him teach in one or more of our core classes. Imagine Jesus teaching ALPHA! The room would be full to overflowing. And we'd want Him heavily involved in the preaching rotation on Sundays. You know the pews would be crammed on those days. No doubt He would quickly be elected chair of our leadership board, giving wise and strategic guidance to every decision. He'd be the natural lead for our outreach program, and we'd want to consult with Him constantly on our discipleship activities.

The truth is, I can't think of any area of ministry in our church—or yours—where we wouldn't want to put Jesus front and center. With or without miracles, He'd meet every need perfectly. Of course, He would also be a delight to have on the team. Unlike so many gifted people, His skills would be matched by His winsome and gracious character.

I get excited just thinking about it. The only drawback? There would be only one of Him, and only so many hours in the day and week. It would be tempting to involve Him in so many things around the church that no time was left to eat or sleep.

(Actually, there might be some other challenges too. With Jesus doing everything so well, the rest of us might be tempted to back off and leave it all in His hands. And what would happen to the other churches in our community, the ones where someone else besides Jesus was preaching and teaching and doing visitation? No matter how hard we tried to be a good sister congregation, I can't help thinking that the blessing of having Jesus on our team would be a challenge and even a source of envy and frustration for them.)

So perhaps it's good that Jesus hasn't quietly returned and joined the worship team at one of our churches. God's plans are the best plans, after all. But that invites the question: what would be the next best thing?

Well, imagine what might happen if the Spirit-empowered ability to do ministry which was so clearly present in Jesus could somehow be distributed across our church community—and even better, across all the churches that follow Him? Imagine if one member of our church was able to care for those in need with the heart of Jesus, while another could teach with Jesus' compelling clarity. What if others could lead with His wisdom, and reach out with His godly attractiveness? It wouldn't be quite the same as having Jesus Himself on the team. None of us

could match His ability, and none of us could consistently show the same gracious character. But it would still be wonderful! It would certainly result in fruitful ministry, and I'm sure it would nurture our individual growth and strengthen our sense of fellowship in community.

Does that sound appealing? Exciting? Good! Then we're ready to talk about the gifts of the Spirit. Because at the heart of things, this is what the New Testament's (NT's) theology of "spiritual gifts" is all about.

The Bible tells us that the Spirit of God—the Spirit of Christ—builds resources for ministry into the life of every Christian. It doesn't teach us about these gifts, and about being the "Body of Christ," just as a clever way to make us get along with each other or to goad us into being more busy with church work. The main point isn't even to help us find the place where we feel comfortable and fulfilled as we "plug in" to our church's programs. The most important thing about spiritual gifts, the thing we must never forget, is that these are distributed on the members of the church *so that Jesus can work through us* to accomplish His mission.

This is an amazing truth! And it is important. It's important for our understanding of the Bible. Ignore the Spirit's gifts and we will not have a well-rounded grasp of what the church is and how it's supposed to function. Without this theme our theology of the Holy Spirit and His work in our lives will be stunted. It's an important part of the NT's teaching.

The Spirit's gifts are important for practical church ministry. The easiest way to make this point is simply to do a little research in global church growth statistics. It's widely recognized that if you identify the churches and denominational bodies which have flourished and grown most rapidly over the past 125 years, almost all have this common feature: they believe in, learn about, and seek to utilize their members' spiritual gifts. This makes good sense. A gift emphasis goes hand-in-hand with an expectation that God will work through the church. It also promotes "every-member ministry," where the church's life is built around the very biblical conviction that every believer can and should be involved in some form of service, and that a congregation is most healthy when ministry is done by the whole body and not just by a few specialized leaders.

A sound theology of spiritual gifts is also important for our own individual spiritual lives. It helps us to appreciate who we are in Jesus. It allows us to find our place in the Christian community, and to appreciate the role of others around us. It gives a sense of purpose and significance. It is one of the ways we experience the transforming power of God, and a strategic source of personal growth.

The Bible's message about the gifts of the Spirit is important. It is exciting and life-transforming, and I'm thrilled to explore it together with you.

At the same time, I'm strapping on my boots and gloves, taking a deep breath, and preparing to do some hard work.

It can be tempting to think that if a subject is important, it should also be easy. That would be lovely; but on reflection I think we all realize that it isn't so. For the most part, the really worthwhile things in life require effort. History tells us this is as true inside the church as it is outside, and it applies to Bible study and theological reflection as much as to other aspects of

church life. Our spiritual ancestors wrestled long and hard to frame what we now call the doctrine of the Trinity: describing the relationship between God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In later years they struggled at length to gain clarity and agreement about exactly how grace works and what it means that salvation comes to us through faith. These are important aspects of the Bible's message, but they generate questions, and it required time and effort to sift through those questions in a way that was broadly satisfying. So we shouldn't be too surprised to learn that the Spirit's gifts for ministry have also been a source of struggle in many churches and for many Christians.

It's true that in Scripture the most fundamental truths are taught often, clearly, consistently, and directly. It's also true that when a subject comes up in many places in the Bible, it's possible for us to read selectively, picking a few favorite passages and building entire doctrines on them without taking the time to consider other teaching that deserves our attention. When we sense that a subject is essential, we become deeply, passionately committed to what we have learned. Sometimes that passion and commitment also gets transferred to our own particular perspective on issues that are influenced by our unique personal experiences. And let's be honest: sometimes the Bible's profound and important truths are complex, even a little mysterious, making it possible for us to oversimplify in the effort to explain things clearly.

Christians can struggle, debate, even fight over important biblical truths for these and other reasons. Perhaps God allows this so that we are forced to learn patience and grace, and driven to study His Word together at length.

So, though I'm delighted to launch into this exploration of the Spirit's gifts, I'm also conscious that the topic may bring some challenges with it. I'm not discouraged by this, but it reminds me that I need to be prepared. Since we're taking this journey together, it's only fair that I encourage you to be prepared as well.

We'll talk more about specific challenges and some strategies for tackling them in the next chapter. For now, let me finish this introduction with a few words about what you will find in the coming pages.

(1) This is a study guide, designed to get you involved in the study process.

We need to do more than just study if we are going to live out our theology of spiritual gifts. But we can't "live out a theology" until we have one, and we're most likely to apply our theology when we've had an active part in developing it and we take personal ownership of it. Besides, one of the best ways to ease tensions and get past disagreements is to sit down and study together, side-by-side. So study must be our starting point, and the more we are all actively involved in that study, the better.

You may be surprised to hear that this is not the typical approach to spiritual gifts; most books on this subject go a different direction. Usually they take the form of a written lecture: the author shares information with you in the hope that you, the reader, will be persuaded to adopt their conclusions and helped as you follow their advice. Some books function as multiple-choice lectures: you are presented with several perspectives and invited to weigh and choose between

them. Many are filled with inspiring stories that help to reinforce the author's points and make them feel practical and compelling. Many will invite you to become actively involved at the point where it's time to figure out what gifts you have. But actual study guides, designed to help you engage the Bible's teaching first-hand, are surprisingly rare.

Now please don't misunderstand. There will be some "lecturing" in this book, too. I've spent most of my adult life in the academic world, teaching in seminaries and working on research projects. One of my main research interests has been the gifts of the Spirit in the NT. So I've explored literally hundreds of books, articles, web resources, and presentations, and have invested hundreds of hours in my own study of relevant passages. I've presented in church seminars and taught formal graduate courses on the subject. I've got deep drawers full of information to share, and I'm going to present some of it as we go. Naturally, I've developed my own views on the subject, and though I will not nag you to agree with me on every point, my personal conclusions will inevitably find their way to the surface. If I didn't think I had some useful things to offer, I wouldn't be writing a book at all! And I assume you are hoping to gain some things from this book, or else you wouldn't be reading it.

All the same, my main goal is to give you tools that will enrich *your own study* of Scripture. It's my prayer that at the end of this project, you will have arrived at a solid understanding of the Spirit's gifts and a set of conclusions on the issues which are truly *your own*, grounded on a wise and thorough examination of the Bible's teaching that *you have done for yourself*. This applies whether you are studying alone, or whether you arrive at a consensus position as part of a group study. It's the best outcome I can think of, and it seems like a reasonable way to engage a biblical theme which is all about the Spirit of God being present in, and guiding every member of the body of Christ.

So please, don't just read this book. Read with your Bible open. If you're comfortable with a concordance and other study tools, bring them into the study, too. And don't just take what I say as "gospel." Check for yourself. Dig into passages—especially the key ones. Draw your own conclusions. It will take a little longer, but the result will be much more meaningful.

(2) As time allows, we are going to attempt to cover the full subject area.

There is a lot to explore. As a result, most authors who write on spiritual gifts choose to limit their focus. One of the most common strategies is to overview some basic ideas—defining spiritual gifts, describing the concept briefly, then looking at prominent gifts from 1 Corinthians, Romans, or Ephesians—without attempting to study any of the passages in depth. Usually these books end with practical advice about how to identify and use your own gifts. Other authors will focus their attention almost entirely on one gift or a small selection, usually examining the more spectacular or controversial gifts like tongues and prophecy. There is an entire literature devoted to debated issues such as the availability of the "miraculous gifts." You can find books on other specialized topics as well.

I've found a handful of good resources that attempt to cover the whole subject of the Spirit's gifts: definition, basic concept, how gifts work, specific gifts, debated issues, and

practical application.¹ As you can imagine, these books are usually much larger. Most are also quite technical. They are wonderful research resources, but using them to guide a basic personal or small-group study is like using a freight train to pick up your groceries.

I am trying something different in this volume. I find that there is much to be gained from thinking holistically about the overall concept of spiritual gifts, then dealing with the specific gifts and debated issues against that backdrop. So our study will be broader than most. At the same time, I want to keep this short and simple enough that you can work through it in a reasonable time-frame without getting lost in the details. This means we'll need to do some summarizing and simplifying along the way, and we'll have to live with the constant tension between trying to cover too much and not having enough time to probe deeply. This won't be the perfect study for every person or every situation, but I trust we will find a reasonable and helpful balance.

(3) We're going consider the teaching of the whole Bible.

Normally when Christians explore a major doctrinal area, they start in Genesis and work through the rest of Scripture, seeking to learn all that the Bible has to say about God or sin or salvation or Christ. No wise theologian builds a doctrine of God from two OT passages, a verse in the gospels, and three paragraphs from Paul's letters. Oddly, though, it has become a normal practice to anchor a whole study on spiritual gifts to a handful of paragraphs in 1 Corinthians and Romans, perhaps glancing at Ephesians 4 and a couple verses from Timothy.

I understand why this is done. Most books are designed to offer a simple introduction, and it's just easier to limit the focus to one or two passages. More significant: you will hear people observe that "The Bible only talks about 'spiritual gifts' in a couple places." This is true—if we limit our study to passages that use the exact expression "spiritual gifts." But in my view this is a misunderstanding. If we want to learn what the Bible teaches about salvation, we don't limit ourselves to passages that contain the word "salvation." We consider a whole range of terms and images that relate to the concept. We end up with a richer and better balanced theology as a result.

In the same way, in the coming chapters I will argue that we get a richer appreciation for the Spirit's gifts when we consider a wider selection of Scripture passages that talk about how God equips His people with what they need to serve Him, and how Christ works through the church by the indwelling Spirit.

I'll pick this matter up again in chapter 3. For now, it will suffice to say that we will be thinking about spiritual gift themes that are woven through the entire Bible. This will give our study a very different flavor from almost anything else you will find on the market today. I think you will find it enriching, as I have.

¹ As it happens, I've written one of these, too. If you are looking for a more in-depth treatment than what this book offers, and especially if you anticipate teaching this subject at some point, or if you want more engagement with the literature, you may want to have a look at Kenneth G. Radant, *Grace for Service* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock), 2023.

(4) Expect this study to run at a “popular-but-serious” level.

People often ask: is this class for beginners, or for mature folk with lots of background, or some other target audience? My goal is to make this study accessible to a wide range of regular individuals and groups in the church who want to learn. You won’t need any specialized skills to participate. I’ll do my best to avoid technical jargon, and to keep discussions of Greek and Hebrew to a minimum. There are very few footnotes, and no long digressions into what so-and-so argued in her doctoral dissertation or recent academic article.²

This is a broadly accessible study. But it is a *study*. To help you engage with the subject matter I will sometimes ask questions about your experience, how you feel, and the like. These are valuable conversations among brothers and sisters. But when we are digging into the relevant Bible passages, I will never ask “What do you *feel* that such-and-such a verse is saying to you?” I operate on the assumption that when we study the Bible, our main concern is to learn what each passage was designed to communicate between its original authors and their intended readers in their historical context; and then to consider how that message can be thoughtfully applied to us today. I’ll say more about this assumption and its implications in chapter 1. It does *not* imply that I devalue the role of the Holy Spirit in speaking to us through Scripture. On the contrary, I understand (as do the majority of Protestant Christian leaders across the centuries) that this is how the Spirit of God chose to speak to us through His Word.

So as we go we will discuss word definitions, grammatical structure, rhetorical devices, and some issues of translation where they make a difference. We will pay close attention to flow of thought, honoring context as the cardinal framework for interpretation. You don’t need to fear that I will lead into a highly technical form of Bible study. But I will lead us in an *exegetical* study. Our principal goal will be to hear what the Bible says rather than sharing our own feelings and experiences and creative ideas.

(5) We will move from foundations to Bible study to application.

The most important part of this book is the Bible study component. That’s what I’m most excited about, and I suspect it’s the part that you will want to prioritize. It’s where we will spend the majority of our time.

However, especially when studying in a group, I have always found it helpful to begin by establishing a common framework of goals and ground-rules. This requires a little up-front investment of time, but pays big dividends later on, allowing the participants to work together constructively without becoming bogged down in unsolvable debates that flow out of different assumptions.

So, before we dive into the biblical material, the first couple chapters attempt to lay foundations for the study. Some of you may start into this and then quickly find yourself saying, “I already understand this; I don’t need to review it again.” If that happens, by all means skim

² Here again, if you’re looking for engagement with the scholarly and popular literature on the subject, *Grace for Service* will be much more helpful.

over the chapters and move to the sections that interest you. But please here my word “skim.” I still advise you to take note of the subjects covered in these chapters, just in case you find that you need to come back to them later on. And if you’re using this book for a group study, be sure everyone is aware of the main issues and in agreement about the approach you will take. If you are on the same page from the start, the rest of the study will be more enjoyable and fruitful. And some of the things I present and the conclusions I draw will make better sense if you understand the ground-rules that guide my thinking.

After the Bible study section of the book I have also added two final chapters where I offer some summary thoughts and some advice on ways we can apply the Bible’s spiritual gift teaching to our lives and our church ministries. Here more than anywhere else, you will get a sense of my personal opinions on various things.

I don’t do this because I desperately want every reader to agree with me on every point. As I have said already, this is *your* study, and you need to reach your own conclusions. At the same time, you have a right to know what the study leader thinks, whether or not you agree with me. You may also find that by looking at my conclusions and applications, you will get a clearer understanding of key ideas I’ve presented along the way. More important, I hope this provides a helpful model for moving from Bible study into theological synthesis and practical application.

Here I need to add a caution. Some readers may be tempted to skip straight through to chapters 11 and 12 where I summarize and suggest implications. Perhaps you’re wrestling with some issue and you want a quick answer; or perhaps you’re eager to move into the practical process of finding and using your gifts, and you just can’t wait to get there.

There’s no absolute rule that you must read the book in sequence. I can’t stop you from peeking at the end. Perhaps it’s exactly what you need. However, I will say this. In my opinion, far too many squabbles and frustrations have come up around the subject of spiritual gifts because well-meaning people jumped to conclusions too quickly. It’s all too easy to engage in a selective, shallow study, then to dogmatically dig my heels in on preliminary conclusions, imagining that there is nothing more to learn from other people and other passages. That has happened more often than I care to say, and it has not helped the church.

So, read and study in whatever sequence you want. But please, do not allow yourself to settle into firm conclusions until you’ve done the hard work of studying the subject from beginning to end. If your initial thoughts were right, they will be reinforced. If they were a little off-center, they’ll be corrected. Most likely all of us will find that our first impressions are refined. And that’s good—that’s what Bible study ought to do.

I’ve asked you to imagine what it would be like if Jesus joined your church’s ministry team. I hope that whetted your appetite to join our study. Because, according to the Bible’s teaching about the Spirit’s gifts, Jesus really is present, and He really does want to be part of your church’s ministry to the body and in your community. He wants to work through you—through every single believer in your fellowship. That’s an exciting prospect!

Jesus will do this whether or not we have a fully-developed theology of spiritual gifts, whether or not we spend a lot of time studying this theme in Scripture. He doesn't need our study to work in us. But God has given us His Word to help us live more fully in His will. So I sincerely believe that as we engage the Scriptures to learn about the gifts of the Spirit, we position ourselves to experience the work of Jesus through us even more fully.

May that be true in every church that proclaims our Lord's name. May it be true in my church and in yours. By God's grace, may this study contribute in some small way to that goal. Amen!

Some questions to consider

- I've emphasized the idea of Jesus working through the body, through the members of the church. Is this something you've considered? Is it part of the worldview and the ministry ethos of your church? Why or why not? How might your church be impacted if this idea was deeply embraced?
- If you're engaging in a group study, it might be useful to ask each member: what experience have you had with spiritual gift books and materials, and/or with classes or Bible studies? Is this new territory for you, or an area where you've spent a lot of time?
- For anyone who has done some previous study or attended other classes or presentations, how does my description of this Bible study compare with what you've experienced in the past? Similarities? Differences?
- What do you hope to get out of this study? Reasons for engaging it now?