

# Understanding Spiritual Gifts

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*<sup>4</sup> Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, <sup>5</sup> so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.*

*<sup>6</sup> In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. <sup>7</sup> If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. <sup>8</sup> If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.*

— Romans 12:4-8

## WHAT ARE SPIRITUAL GIFTS?

When you become a Christian, the spirit of God comes to live inside you and gives you a spiritual gift that you did not work for, earn, or create. A spiritual gift is a manifestation of God's own spirit, making himself known through a variety of gifts and people. It's not just a natural talent or skill, though it may coincide with some of your natural talents and abilities. It is a *supernatural* work and ability that God gives you. God gives them to us to help build up the body of Christ and accomplish his purposes in the world. But this doesn't mean that using your gift will always be easy or fun. On the contrary, whenever you engage in the redemptive process on any level, it can be very messy and difficult work.

You do not have to be in a specific, formal ministry setting to use your gifts; they can be used anywhere and in any kind of ministry. They can be used at work, in your neighborhood, and in your family. But this does not mean that serving always aligns with your specific gifting. When there are needs, we can step in and help meet those needs regardless of whether or not we are gifted in those ways. Spiritual gifts are not for you or about you. They are given to each believer so we can help each other. While they can be used in other spheres, they are primarily for the church to help it mature and develop, which means that you have a responsibility to use your gifts well in service to other believers and also to recognize that when your gifts are not needed to serve the body in that specific way, then there is still other work for you to do.

There are several New Testament passages that discuss spiritual gifts: Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4. The point in all of these passages is that God is manifesting himself, through his people, in order to build up the church and bring it to maturity. While these passages list out specific gifts, the gifts listed are not *exhaustive*. There are many ways the Spirit may gift the people of God. These lists are *representative* of the types of gifts the Spirit gives.

We believe spiritual gifts are supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit in believers. Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 give us a thorough explanation of the New Testament gifts, although respected biblical scholars disagree on their meaning and distribution, specifically whether sign gifts like healing and performing miracles are still present and active today. We recognize there are differences in thoughts, opinions, and experiences in defining spiritual gifts. The one true source we can return to without fault is Scripture. The following chart helps us define each gift through the information the Bible provides.



GIFT	SCRIPTURE	WHAT IT MEANS
Administration	1 Corinthians 12:28	A supernatural ability to plant, organize, and execute procedures that accomplish the goals of the church and the mission of God
Leadership	Romans 12:8, 1 Corinthians 12:28	A supernatural ability to give direction and motivate others to accomplish goals
Encouragement	Romans 12:8	A supernatural ability to come alongside someone with words of exhortation, comfort, and counsel
Faith	1 Corinthians 12:9	A supernatural ability to be confidently convinced of God's power and promises to accomplish his will and purpose
Giving	Romans 12:8	A supernatural ability to share the resources you have with cheerfulness
Healing	1 Corinthians 12:9, 28, 30	A supernatural means through which God makes people whole physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually
Mercy	Romans 12:8	A supernatural ability to be sensitive toward those who are suffering, feel genuine sympathy, speak words of compassion
Service	Romans 12:7	A supernatural ability to identify needs and use available resources to meet those needs.
Teaching	1 Corinthians 12:8, 28, Romans 12:7	A supernatural ability to understand and instruct people in the truths of the Bible
Wisdom	1 Corinthians 12:8	A supernatural ability to apply knowledge to life in such a way as to make spiritual truths relevant and practical
Tongues (speaking in and interpreting unknown languages)	1 Corinthians 12:10, 14:1-33a	A supernatural ability to speak in an unknown language, translated by another, so people can hear God's truth in their own language—for their benefit
Miracles	1 Corinthians 12:10, 28	A supernatural ability to be enabled by God to perform actions which witnesses acknowledge are of supernatural origin and means
Prophecy	Romans 12:6, 1 Corinthians 12:10, 14:1-5, 29-33a	Supernatural speech reporting something that God reveals to the speaker, but is not equivalent to Scripture



## HOW DO I IDENTIFY MY SPIRITUAL GIFTS?

While knowing your gifts can be helpful and can enable you to focus your energies well, the Bible doesn't tell us we need to identify our gifts and then go serve in those areas. Instead the Bible tells us that while we are serving, our gifts become evident among the body of Christ through the fruit produced. If you want to know how you might be gifted, the first step is to identify areas of need within the church and begin serving. As fruit is produced through you, other believers will affirm the gifts they see at work in you.

While no spiritual gifts test or tool is foolproof, the process below may help you explore and identify your potential spiritual gifts, while also considering your individuality and how God has uniquely created you.



**AFFINITY:** What are you passionate about in the body of Christ and the mission of God? What stirs your heart enough to propel it toward action?

**ABILITY:** What are you particularly good at?

**AFFIRMATION:** Describe a time when others told you how God had used you to help them? What had you done? Where have others identified unique ways you are helpful for the body of Christ?

Your **Spiritual Gift(s)** may be where these three things collide.

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### EXAMPLE 1

**AFFINITY:** You are passionate about helping people accomplish a common goal.

**ABILITY:** You have an ability to bring order to chaos, rally others to a cause, and create structures and processes that move a mission forward.

**AFFIRMATION:** Those in positions of leadership over you acknowledge your effectiveness in building teams, structures, and accomplishing goals and so they entrust you with more opportunities to lead and create. Peers come to you for help and advice in these areas of your abilities. Those serving under you are being helped and eager to get on board with what you are doing.

**Potential Spiritual Gift:** Administration/Leadership

### EXAMPLE 2

**AFFINITY:** You are passionate about vulnerable people and want to care for those who are hurting. You are eager to offer help and speak truth into others' lives.

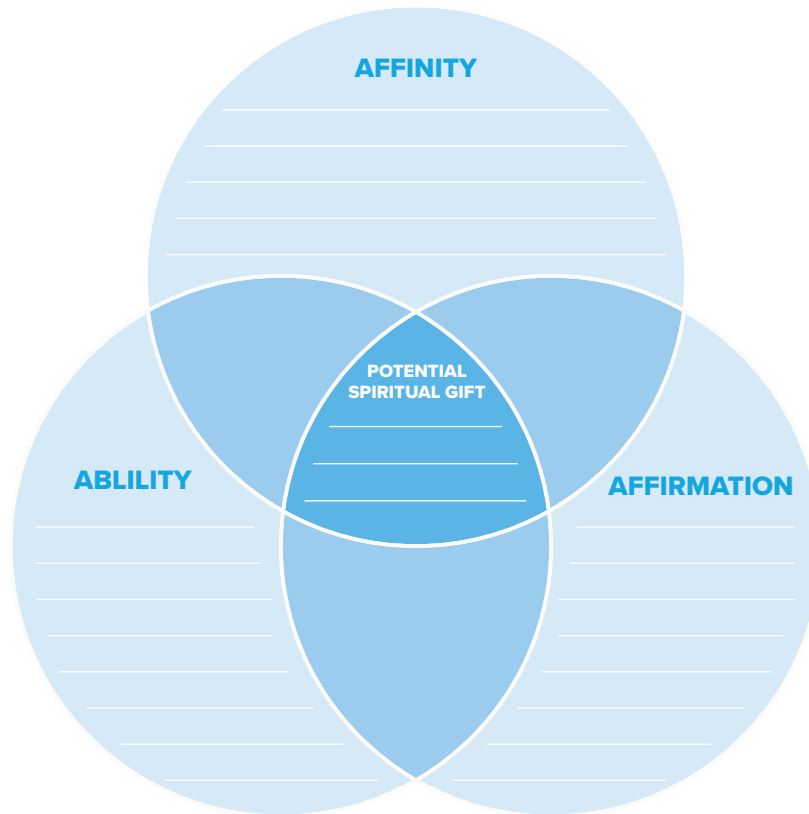
**ABILITY:** You are keenly aware of others' needs. You have a unique ability to put yourself in another's shoes and speak into their brokenness.

**AFFIRMATION:** Those in positions of leadership over you acknowledge your effectiveness in caring for those in positions of brokenness and vulnerability and so they bring you into difficult situations to offer support and compassionate care. Peers come to you for help and advice in these areas of your abilities. Those you are serving seek you out for wisdom and encouragement and are growing and flourishing through your interactions with them.

**Potential Spiritual Gift:** Mercy, Service, Encouragement

While these examples aren't perfect, they can be helpful in seeing how God uses the body of Christ to affirm how your abilities and affinities may coincide with your spiritual gifts.

**Follow the prompts below and fill in your own circles.**



**AFFINITY:**

- What are you passionate about in the body of Christ and the mission of God? What stirs your heart enough to propel it toward action?

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- Write out some things you are passionate about inside the circle labeled Affinity.
- *Ask yourself: Why am I passionate about this? What experiences shaped me? How do these passions reflect God's heart for his people and his mission?*

**ABILITY:**

- What are you particularly good at?

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- Write out some of your strongest abilities inside the circle labeled Ability.
- *Ask yourself: How might these abilities be helpful to the church and God's mission?*



**AFFIRMATION:**

- Describe a time when others told you how God had used you to help them? What had you done? In what ways have others entrusted you with more responsibility or opportunities to serve within the body of Christ?

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- Write out a few strengths/gifts those in leadership over you, peers, and those you have served have affirmed inside the circle labeled Affirmation.
- *Ask yourself: Is there a theme to the strengths and unique contribution I make in the lives of others?*

Your **Spiritual Gift(s)** may be where these three things collide. Look at the Spiritual Overview Grid and choose one or two that might fit and take a few moments to answer the questions below.

**WHICH OF THESE GIFTS HAVE BEEN AFFIRMED BY OTHERS IN THE CHURCH?**

**WHO HAS AFFIRMED THESE GIFTS?**

**WHO ARE THE PEOPLE WHO ARE LEARNING FROM YOU AND ARE FOLLOWING YOU?**

As you answer these questions, they can help provide clarity regarding how God may be manifesting himself through you. Remember, this list is not exhaustive, only representative of the ways in which God equips believers to build the church.

## A FEW COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT SPIRITUAL GIFTS

There are many misconceptions about spiritual gifts within the church, but we want to highlight a few of the most common so we can have our thinking reframed by the Scriptures and begin to bring our lives in alignment with God’s mission and purpose for spiritual gifts.

### 1. Operating in my spiritual gifts will be fulfilling

This is a common cultural idea in both the world and the church. We tend to believe that when we find our “sweet spot” everything will be fulfilling and easy. While there may be times that you feel joy and fulfillment, these gifts often have a shadow side. They come with a burden. For a person with a mercy gift, the suffering of others is heavy and hard to shake. A person with a leadership gift may often feel a measure of loneliness and isolation from others and a sense of responsibility that is their constant companion. These gifts aren’t given to us for personal fulfillment but for sacrificially serving the body of Christ. This means that we are “pouring ourselves out as a drink offering” (Philippians 2:17) on behalf of others. This is depleting and costly work.

### 2. I should only serve in the areas I am gifted

One problem with identifying our spiritual gifts is that we begin to believe we should only serve in the area of our giftedness. This is untrue. The Bible calls all believers to evangelize (share the gospel with non-believers), be generous financially, serve other believers, encourage and exhort one another, and extend mercy. God has equipped us and incorporated us into his mission for the world, so when the body of Christ has a need, regardless of what it is, we can and should step in to help.

### 3. I don’t need to develop my gift

Gifts are like a muscle. The first time you use it may be awkward and clumsy. It’s like a child learning to walk. For example, the first time you try to share the gospel with a stranger or even a friend, you may stumble over your words or wonder if you are saying the right things. While it may never feel natural or comfortable, you become more accustomed to the process and all it entails. This is the same as teaching or leading your first Bible study. You do the necessary preparations to lead the study, then step out in faith and prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit to work through you to stir the hearts of those you are leading. Over time, you find a rhythm and understand how to prepare, all the while knowing that it is the Spirit who must produce the fruit.

**Take a few moments before moving onto the next section to reflect on the following questions:**

**WHICH OF THESE MISCONCEPTIONS DO YOU IDENTIFY WITH IN YOUR OWN LIFE?**

**HOW HAVE THESE MISCONCEPTIONS HINDERED YOU IN MINISTRY TO OTHERS?**



## WHAT ARE POSSIBLE TEMPTATIONS AND ABUSES OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS?

While we have been entrusted with the Holy Spirit and given spiritual gifts for the good of the church, we still grapple with indwelling sin. This means that we will at times find ourselves struggling with mixed motives and a variety of other temptations regarding our gifting. Below are a handful of some of the most common and potentially damaging to the body of Christ.

### 1. Overidentifying with your spiritual gifts

Your gift is not who you are. These are manifestations of God's own Spirit through you. The gift says more about the Giver than the recipient. Your gifts may ebb and flow or even change over time. There may be times these gifts are suppressed and not utilized within the church and there may be times they are used in powerful and unexplainable ways. All of this means you cannot afford to place your identity in the gifts you have or you will always swing between self-protection (feeling threatened) and self-promotion (needing affirmation).

### 2. Equating spiritual gifts with spiritual maturity

Paul is very clear in 1 Corinthians that spiritual gifts do not equal spiritual maturity. The Corinthians were very gifted, but they were not utilizing their gifts in mature ways. Just because one person has a gift of teaching or leading does not mean they are more mature. In fact, a person with the gift of mercy may be far more mature than the one with a leadership gift. We cannot afford to elevate those with more public gifts and marginalize those with gifts that operate more in the background. There is one Spirit represented in diverse ways. He is the source of each gift, which means all of these gifts are valuable and necessary to the body of Christ.

### 3. Feeling entitled to my gift and specific uses of it

A gift is a gift. We are not entitled to the gift, nor are we entitled to determine how or when it is used. Many believers feel that the church must provide opportunities for them to use their specific gifts in a formal ministry setting. You do not need to be in a formal ministry to exercise your gift. It can be used anywhere and at any time.

### 4. Not allowing others to speak into your giftings

We need other's insights, wisdom, guidance, warnings, and encouragement in all aspects of our faith—including our spiritual gifts. Because we often admire or desire specific gifts, placing higher values on them, we can be deceived into thinking we have or should pursue that specific gift. We need to be open to what others have to say about our gifts—telling us where we are and are not gifted. We need to humbly receive that truth, even when it isn't what we want to hear. And we also need to be open to correction and warnings in how we are using our gifts so that they are helpful to the church rather than creating damage, chaos, and division.

### 5. Comparing spiritual gifts

This is a common temptation in the church. We fall prey to this temptation, especially when we have equated spiritual gifts with our identity. When we see other's gifts being praised or elevated, we can dismiss or despise the way God has gifted us. We may grow envious or jealous. We might feel a need to prove our value and worth. We might shrink into the background altogether and fail to bring our gift to bear on the body of Christ, thinking it insignificant and unnecessary. Or we may grow proud, thinking our gift is more important and more productive for the body. Humility is vital. We must think of ourselves and others rightly. Just as our body parts all have a special function, so does each member of the church (Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

### 6. Using your spiritual gifts at the cost of others

In 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul challenges the church that they were injuring one another through the use of their gifts. Our highest goal must be love (1 Corinthians 14:1). *This means sometimes we need to use restraint in our gifts, maybe even suppressing them entirely, if it would cause harm to another believer.* The end goal of all gifts is that the body is being helped.

While these are some of the temptations we face, this list is not exhaustive. There are many more ways we can abuse and misuse the gifts God has entrusted to us. Before you move onto the next section, take a few moments to reflect on the following questions:



**WHICH OF THESE ABUSES OR MISUSES HAVE YOU WITNESSED IN THE CHURCH? HOW DID IT AFFECT UNITY AND HEALTH IN THE BODY?**

**WHICH OF THESE ABUSES OR MISUSES DO YOU IDENTIFY IN YOUR OWN LIFE? WHY DO YOU THINK YOU STRUGGLE IN THAT AREA? WHO HAS BEEN INJURED BY YOUR MISUSE OF GIFTS? WHAT STEPS OF REPENTANCE MIGHT YOU TAKE IN THIS AREA?**

**HOW HAS THIS AFFECTED YOUR ABILITY TO BE COMPELLING AND EFFECTIVE IN SERVING THE BODY OF CHRIST?**





## WHAT ARE MY NEXT STEPS?

1. Ask a mentor or friend *who is committed to telling you the truth* to review your diagram. Draw more than one if it's helpful. Input from a trusted friend, ministry lead, pastor, and/or someone in your biblical community will give you further clarity and may even help you identify an ability or affinity in yourself that you are not able to see. It may also help you identify ways in which you have been striving to identify with a specific gift and rejecting the unique ways in which God has made you.
2. As we have already learned our spiritual gifts are for the purpose of expanding the work of the church and the mission of God in the world. How are you currently using your spiritual gift(s) in the church and in the community? Who is being helped? Who is following you?

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3. People very rarely start serving in the area of their gifting. As you serve over time, the body notices your gifts and moves you more into areas of your specific gifting. If you've never had anyone affirm fruit they've seen in your ministry to others, what are one or two areas you could begin serving within the body of Christ?

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4. Spiritual gifts should never be exercised at the cost of spiritual virtues like humility, faith, hope and love (1 Corinthians 13). They are the conduit through which spiritual gifts flow. Can you identify some ways you have used your gifts while neglecting spiritual virtues? What are some ways you can continue to grow in and develop these spiritual virtues?

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