

Jason Upchurch - 1 Corinthians 12:10 - The Spirit's Gift of Tongues and Interpretation

Well, we are officially concluding our in-depth look at the spiritual gifts mentioned here in 1 Corinthians. This is not an exhaustive list of all the gifts the Holy Spirit gives. This list is likely not even all the gifts the Corinthians had in their church. This list is likely custom tailored to address the difficulties that were happening in the Corinthian church.

And this morning we return to the gift of tongues and interpretation of tongues. I was getting coffee while working on this sermon this week when someone asked me what I was preaching on and I told them and they said, "Wow - well, that's a hot topic." And the reality is it could be but it doesn't have to be.

Why is it a hot topic? Well, first of all many people simply don't understand what the Bible teaches on this issue. Both people in charismatic churches as well as those in cessationist churches. Let's be honest, a lot of times we have a view on what the Bible says on a topic and we just want to hold on to our view because it's comfortable for us and we don't want to change for anything.

So if you're a cessationist like I was, and you're confronted with the reality that there's really no verse that says these gifts have ceased that can make you very uncomfortable. On the other hand, if you're a continuist, but the gift of tongues or prophecy you believe in doesn't match what the Bible describes that can make you uncomfortable as well.

And I think once we're done with this section my hope is that we can just simply be honest with the biblical information we have on this gift. I'm guessing everyone will be uncomfortable by the end and that's okay.

Also, I want to say, I didn't really plan on this, but I think it's going to be helpful to actually work through chapter 14 with these gifts and then come back to chapter 12 and 13. So we're leapfrogging over 12 and 13 as we study this gift and we'll come back.

Why so much time on this gift? I want to spend time on these 2 gifts because I think this gift is just as misunderstood today as it was back in Paul's day. And I think just as misused. It seems that this gift was probably the gift they had the most problems with in Corinth which is why it gets so much attention.

I mentioned last week that the gift of tongues - literally languages - is the ability to speak a foreign language without ever having learned it. And part of what we need to understand is that the one speaking in that foreign language may not even know what they are saying.

For example, if I had the gift of tongues I might be able to instantly start praising God in Arabic but I might not even know what I'm saying in Arabic. But someone who speaks fluent Arabic would hear God being praised and praise God all the more because God was obviously doing a miraculous work in causing me to praise him in a foreign language.

That's the gift of tongues. And from **Acts 2**, it seems like the Spirit gifts different people with different languages. Maybe I have Arabic, maybe you have French, maybe someone has Latin. Interestingly, maybe someone has the gift of speaking in English.

But it's important to understand that the gift of tongues - languages - is a known human language. We have no biblical evidence at all that the gift is just a gibberish language. Or a made up language. The words used for the gift and the descriptions we have of the gift all point to known human languages.

The gift of interpretation is the companion gift: where someone can translate the language without ever having learned the language.

So imagine I stood up and began speaking Arabic. How would you know it was miraculous? Well, you'd need to know 2 things. First, that I never had learned the language. And second, at least one other person would have to know the language to understand me and know I was speaking it. You need those 2 elements.

What if there's no one who can do that? Well, God also equipped some people with the ability to interpret languages. I stand up and miraculously speak Arabic, and someone else miraculously **understands** Arabic and tells the congregation what has been said.

Sometimes, it seems, the person who speaks in tongues also has the gift of interpretation where they can do both things, but that doesn't seem to be the norm.

Okay, that's the recap of last week. So with that background, let's work through this section answer some more questions as we go.

Look down at 12:27-31. Read

A couple of things to point out here. First, this is an amazing gift. It is likely what Paul means when he says it's a "higher" gift because of the more obvious miraculous nature.

Second, not everyone has this gift. Not everyone has all the gifts. There are some branches of charismatic churches that believe everyone who is saved will speak in tongues. And that if you can't speak in tongues you are likely not saved. That's just not true.

In the Greek, these are rhetorical questions and the answer to them is "no." Not all are apostles, not all are teachers, not all work miracles, not all speak in tongues. The Spirit only gifts some believers with this gift. And there's question about whether he still or how often.

Look at 13:1-3. Read

Now, some people will say, "See, here we know that the gift is not always an earthly language. It can also be a heavenly language because he talks about the tongues - the languages - of men and **angels**."

I bring this up because there have literally been studies done on some charismatic churches where they've recorded people speaking and they are not speaking in any known language. It really is babble, and honestly I'm not sure we can say that it's from the Spirit. Everything we read in Scripture points to a known language.

The defense for that is to point to this verse and say, "See, it's a heavenly, angelic language!"

Here's the problem with that view: everything in these 3 verses is hyperbole. It's all exaggeration for effect; it's all over the top examples that don't actually exist happen to prove his point about the importance of love.

Vs. 1 - If he speaks in the tongues of men and angels and aliens and whales...but no love. The point is not that there is an angelic language. The point is it doesn't matter how absolutely amazing your gift is, what matters most in the Christian life is love.

By the way: do you know what languages we see angels speaking? Known languages. Even around the throne of God. They speak Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek - the languages of the people in the Bible. The word angel means messenger so presumably they're fluent in every human language.

Could there be a language that just angels speak? Sure. But we have zero evidence of that and that's not Paul's point here at all.

Vs. 2 - If he has all prophetic powers - no one has ever had all prophetic powers nor understood all mysteries. Jesus during his earthly ministry didn't even know the day and time Jerusalem would be destroyed.

Paul says: if he has all knowledge. You know the only person with all knowledge? God. And there is no one who has ever literally moved mountains with their faith.

Vs. 3 - People have given up all they have and have even been burned for the faith - but Paul hadn't at that point.

These are all extreme examples, most of them non-possibilities, to prove his point that love in the Christian life is crucial. It's not to prove that somehow speaking in tongues is actually speaking in an angelic language.

Look at Vs. 8-12. Read

So the argument that Paul makes here is that spiritual gifts are only so amazing because one day they'll end. Prophecies, tongues, knowledge: those will all end. These are not the amazing, eternal gifts that some people make them out to be.

Now, there's also some misunderstanding with the next section. But I think if we keep in mind that tongues are just foreign languages and we put some pieces together it makes perfect sense.

Now we're going to read this next section and Paul is going to make some observations. Just understand that all these observations are made with the assumption that the languages are not interpreted.

Look at 14:1-5. Read

So it seems like what Paul is trying to do here is downplay the gift of tongues and show why the gift of prophecy is actually better. Tongues is only helpful to the church if there's someone who can interpret the language.

I mean, imagine if I got up and just kept speaking in Arabic. That would be really cool for like 1 minute. Then people would be thinking "this is weird; no one knows what he's saying." At least with prophecy we know what's being said.

That's why he says **Vs. 2. Read**

If this is a genuine work of the Spirit - and he indicates that it might be, he doesn't question it - but there's no interpreter then who's the person singing praise to? God. Because God is the only one who knows what's being said. To everyone else it's a mystery.

Why is prophecy better? Because everyone at least understand the words being said and they're encouraged.

Read 3-4

With prophecy, the whole church is encouraged and comforted. With the legitimate gift of tongues - unless there's interpretation - the only person built up is the person speaking them because they experience the Holy Spirit doing this. Everyone else is clueless.

So here's where he puts it all together. **Read 5**

He says the gift of tongues is good, but only if there's an interpreter. Otherwise prophecy is better because people at least know what's being said. **Read 6-12**

If all you do is speak in a tongue, you better do something else too. Tongues - all on its own - doesn't benefit anyone because there's no meaning without an interpretation. Paul says we even understand that with music. You jump on the piano and start playing random notes, people want you to stop. But if you play even a few notes of well known tune people are understand immediately.

Play a few notes of Axel F or the McDonald's tune and people catch on.

The thing we see clearly in **Vs. 9-10** is that this is a known language. All languages, and that's literally what this gift is (the gift of languages) has meaning. It's only unintelligible if someone doesn't know what's being said. The Spirit is working more effectively in a non-miraculous way like teaching than he is in tongues that aren't interpreted.

Now, here's the interesting thing we're going to see in a second. What are people saying when they speak in tongues? What's the content of the message?

There are many people who have suggested that the gift of tongues might be given to missionaries trying to learn another language because that would speed up the process. That might make sense logically, but we actually never see tongues used in that way nor is it ever described for that purpose.

When we see the gift in use in Acts and even here, we get the idea that what people are doing is praising God. And it's usually those who are newly converted that are doing it - it's not the missionaries trying to communicate with them. The new converts praise God in languages they've never learned.

Acts 2:11: "hear them telling in our own languages the mighty works of God."

Acts 2:17: quoting Joel, Peter says this is actually a type of prophecy

Acts 10:46: Extolling God - they're praising him.

In Acts people are basically praising God. It's a form of worship to God. But in this next section we see it could also be used in prayer. **Read 13-14**

So this is where we see that the person who has the gift of tongues doesn't know what he's saying. The gift of interpretation is a completely different gift that they may or may not have.

The other thing I think is worth noting here is that it's okay to ask God for spiritual gifts. In **14:1** we should earnestly desire these gifts, but here we see specifically we can pray for gifts. That's a good thing! If you want to serve the church in a particular way but aren't sure how, then ask God. It's good to do that.

Okay, what about speaking in tongues being a prayer language? Have you ever heard that? There are some who would say they have the gift, but it's just a private prayer language, not something they use in the congregation.

Two notes on that. First, although they can be used privately in prayer, remember that the gifts are primarily for the building up of the church. It doesn't really make sense that someone who legitimately had the gift would primarily or only use it in private prayer. Like any other spiritual gift, if you've got it use it to bless the congregation. Why wouldn't a person do that?

Second, even those who have the gift and use it in prayer, should desire to understand what they're saying. **Read 13-15**

There's a mental engagement that Paul sees as being a supreme good. A person could actually be praying in a foreign language, not know what they are saying, and it be from the Spirit. But Paul says that's not really all that great. If your mind is unfruitful - if your mind is not engaged - what's the point?

Christianity is not like eastern mystic religions where we separate our minds from our worship. No, our minds should be fully engaged in every aspect of worship, whether we're praying or singing or whatever we do. So if someone does have the legitimate gift of languages they could sing or pray - but Paul says he wants his mind engaged. He wants to know what he's saying.

And so it seems he would rather simply pray and sing in the language he knows that way his mind is fruitful.

I've know at least one person who began their Christian life praying in tongues but over the course of time they stopped. Why? It just didn't seem all that profitable to them to keep going since they didn't know what was being said. Paul makes it clear, it's better that our prayers and praises to God are intelligible than an amazing work of the Spirit and non-intelligible.

And if someone is praying in the church, look at this. **Read 16-19**

So when we gather together in the church, if someone gets up and prays and we have no idea what they're saying it doesn't benefit anyone. The outsider - the one who doesn't know the language - can't say amen.

I knew a gal once who was from the Philippines. She did not have the gift of tongues, but she did speak several languages and I remember gathering in a prayer circle with her and when it was her turn to pray, for whatever reason, she chose to pray in her foreign language. And while it sounded really cool - I didn't know what to say or even think. As Paul says, I was an outsider. How could I say amen? We had no common ground. God knew what she was saying, but I didn't and the group wasn't built up at all.

So in church, it's better to just speak plainly for everyone to understand, than speak a bunch of words that no one understands - even if those words are actually from the Holy Spirit. Because what the Spirit wants is understanding and instruction and building up.

Okay, this next section is where we see that tongues is actually a sign for unbelievers. It's an act of judgement on Israel. **Read 20-25**

So Paul quotes a passage from Isaiah where God is judging Israel. And the judgment is that Israel will be overthrown by foreigners - specifically Assyria. So foreigners, who speak foreign languages, will judge unfaithful Israel.

Well, it seems that God has actually designed tongues in that very same kind of way. See, most of the Jews in Jesus's day rejected Jesus. They rebelled against God, just like they did in Isaiah's day. And so God judged them. Not by sending in an invading army, but by pouring out salvation on the Gentiles who didn't speak their native language.

So when unbelieving Jews hear someone speak in tongues, they don't understand. It's gibberish to them, which is a sign that God has judged them. God has turned from working solely with Israel and he has opened the doors of salvation to the nations who speak all these various language.

So there's a sense that when someone speaks in tongues, there's this miraculous amazing thing happening and the church knows for sure that God is there. At the same time, unbelieving Jews who might be listening would not understand in their native language and it would be an act of judgment.

Which leads Paul to the warning. Look, if you're all in church and everyone is speaking in tongues and an unbeliever came in and heard all this and saw all this going on at the same time, he'd think "You're crazy. You're out of your minds!" It would be chaos.

If it was prophecy, where at least he could understand what was being said and might be convicted by what was said, that's different. But with tongues - if it was just a big free-for-all with no interpreters - he'd think you're nuts and the gospel message would be tarnished.

What comes next, then, is Paul's solution for the issue with tongues.

Now, before we read this, you should know that there may have been people in the Corinthian church faking the gift of tongues. We don't know for 100% sure. But imagine if I just started saying something in a language you didn't understand. There's really no way you would know if the Spirit was working or I was just making it up. Same is true in Corinth.

There would be 2 ways to confirm the legitimacy of this gift. First, someone with the gift of interpretation could verify the gift. I start speaking Arabic or whatever and someone with the gift of interpretation miraculously verifies the gift. I mean, unless the interpreter was just making stuff up, that would verify the sign.

Side: When I was in seminary some guys from the seminary who knew NT Greek went to a charismatic church and got up and spoke some memorized passages in Greek as though it were tongues. And someone got up and interpreted what they said. The interpretation did not match what they said.

Should they have done that? No, this is not the way you go about correcting someone. They didn't have the key ingredient from chapter 13 which is what? Love. They were actually disciplined by the seminary for that.

At the same time, I think we need to make sure that we don't put ourselves into a situation where we're never held to account about whether or not we really have a gift.

So someone with the true gift of interrelation could verify my speech.

The other option, of course, is someone who could actually speak the language could verify my words. That second one is probably the way the gift would be the most amazing. Because it would be like a double blind study - it would be completely confirming.

Now, let me just say, I've never experienced the legit gift of tongues that I know of. I've heard that this gift has happened from people I trust and are credible but I've never seen this. I've never seen someone who didn't know Spanish get up, praise God in Spanish, and someone say "Wow, when did you learn Spanish?" "I didn't, was that Spanish?" I've never seen that.

I've been in places where people get up and speak in tongues and I'll be honest, I'm not sure it's actually a language and someone gets up with an interpretation and it's a pretty generic & vague message interpretation. Is it the real gift? Boy, I honestly have my doubts.

Because the effect is nothing like in **Acts 2** where the people were amazing and astounded and perplexed and astonished. People were just like "Oh okay, thanks." It wasn't jaw dropping.

It seems like the way this gift is most astonishing is when it is miraculous beyond a shadow of any doubt. If there's doubt, it seems that God says it's useless in the church.

So this is where Paul puts down some guidelines. He doesn't know if the people are faking the gift or if everyone has the legit gift and is just prideful about it. But here are his guidelines. **Read 26-33, 39-40**

The amazing thing here is that Paul gives just a couple guidelines that will sort out the whole situation here. And the guideline is basically have a good liturgy - a good order of service - and an interpreter.

Everything in church should happen in order, with 2 or 3 at the most speaking in tongues or prophesying. There might be 9 people who legitimately speak in tongues or prophesy, but 2 or 3 at the most and in turn.

And there has to be an interpretation.

How does this apply to us? You're probably all nervous. We've never had anyone who spoke in tongues stand up to give that revelation to the congregation.

While I've mentioned I'm open but cautious, I find it odd that the Holy Spirit would only give this gift to some churches and not others. Especially tongues which seems to come naturally in the book of Acts without prompting - it seems like that gift has at the very least waned significantly.

When we look at the other gifts - teaching, mercy, faith, administration - those the Spirit grants liberally.

So what would happen if someone had the gift of tongues wanted to stand up and speak? Well, **Vs. 39** we don't forbid it. But, just like someone who wanted to sing wouldn't just stand up and start singing in the middle of church, they should come talk to me or Andy first so we can talk about the gift and weigh it like any other gift.

If it were legitimate, that would be a very cool thing. It would be the first time - I think - I've ever seen this gift exercised legitimately in the congregation. And that would be a miraculous work of the Spirit. There'd need to be an interpreter and it'd need to be done in order.

But if God so gifted someone with that gift and all the checks and balances were in place, he could use it to glorify himself among us.

I want to encourage all of us that we should never be afraid of the work of God. If you're in the camp that looks on this gift with suspicion, we have all we need to keep the church from falling into chaos.

If you're in the camp that sees this as ongoing, know that we should ensure all is done to verify the Spirit's legitimacy of this gift and use it to bless the congregation.

Pray