

SPIRITUAL GIFTS—UNOPENED AND MISUSED

1 Corinthians 12:1

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We have been away from this for several weeks now. I think it would be appropriate that we take just a moment to see where we are in the Corinthian letter. Someone has said that you can remember Corinthians very well if you just remember four words that help you look at the outline—the first word is “introduction”—it spans the first 9 verses of the letter.

The second word is the word “carnality.” It begins with verse 9 of chapter 1 and goes through chapter 11. We have that teaching in the Book of Corinthians with matters such as pride and party, spirit and divisions, immorality, lawsuits among Christians, uncertainty about whether or not to eat food offered to idols, questions about marriage and sexuality, and even the need to correct some persons who were getting drunk at the Lord’s Table.

The third key word in Corinthians is the word “spirituality.” We derive it from reading the first few words of chapter 12, “Now about spiritual gifts, brethren.” The word that is most commonly used for “spiritual gifts” is *charismata*. “Grace gifts” from which we derive the term “charismatic renewal.”

But that is not the word Paul employs here. It is not the word *charismata*. It is a word which can probably best be translated in our language now, concerning “the spiritualities,” “the things that are spiritual” as opposed to the things that are carnal. And in 1 Corinthians 12, in the spiritualities, Paul shares with us the gifts of the Spirit, in 1 Corinthians 13, the fruit of the Spirit, expressing itself in love, in 1 Corinthians 14, the order the Spirit maintains in the worshipping community, and in chapter 15, the glory that the Spirit works in the resurrection of our bodies. All things that we’ll look at in coming weeks.

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The fourth key word in Corinthians is the word “practicality”: “now concerning the offering,” “now concerning greeting to the saints.”

I started out this week fully intending to share the first eleven verses of 1 Corinthians 12. After the first few hours, I decided that we would cut back and just have the first eight verses. Then at the end of few more hours, I decided that we would just take the first seven. Then I finally decided that we would just take the first verse. “Now about spiritual gifts [now about spiritualities], brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant” (1 Corinthians 12:1, NIV).

There are two kinds of ignorance that can exist in regard to spiritual gifts.

One sort of ignorance is one I would call the ignorance that does not open the gifts which the Lord is giving to His church, which believes—in many cases—that they can’t be opened because they’re not for today.

The other kind of ignorance is the ignorance of the misuse of the gifts which have been opened. It’s obvious in Paul’s writing to the Corinthians that he does not need to correct the first type of ignorance. The Corinthians had opened all their gifts and, long ago, had thrown away the wrappings. He needs to correct the misuse of the gifts. But since in our era and day there is a considerable ignorance of the gifts of the Spirit that arises, because the gifts have not been opened, I thought it might be well that we spend a few moments there.

There are some who believe that spiritual gifts may not be opened. Why do they hold this position? Because there are many in the body of Christ today that honestly believe that the gifts were not given for today. Those who share that viewpoint have a number of reasons they will suggest which I will just look at, touch at briefly and flesh out of response to them. Not in an argumentative way, but realizing it is needful to touch on them, because sometimes we can get

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trapped into believing something that really is not true. If we can just have a moment of opening the door and being liberated from that viewpoint, we can then enter into what God has for us.

I. One of the most commonly heard views that the gifts are not for today is that the Lord withdrew these manifestations of His Holy Spirit at the close of the apostolic age.

Therefore, when you look at gifts of healings and miracles and faith and tongues and interpretation of tongues and prophecy, it is understood by those who advocate this position that the Lord, at the end of the apostolic age, withdrew them. He intended them only to last as long as the apostles, to get the church going. The verse that is often used to support this is 1 Corinthians 13:8, “Where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled [or, “they shall pass away”]” (NIV). Those who use that verse to support that viewpoint, don’t go on to read the rest of the verse or the rest of the passage. It also says that knowledge shall pass away along with tongues and prophecy. I don’t think any one of us in the body of Christ today is willing to concede that, with the apostolic age, knowledge died.

Paul here is not talking at all about the difference between the apostolic age and the age which follows them in church history. He is rather talking about the difference between the present age and the age which is to come when Jesus returns. He’s saying that when Jesus returns, then the gifts of prophecy, the gifts of tongues, the gifts of knowledge, will no longer be needed. They will be swallowed up by the revelation of Jesus Christ himself. Then the perfect will come (1 Corinthians 13:10). But in the meantime, we see through a glass, darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12). Paul himself has said, at the beginning of this letter to the Corinthians, “Therefore, you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.” That’s a great statement for the church. The church is not to lack any spiritual gift until the Lord Jesus Christ is revealed. That’s how long the gifts are to last. That’s what’s stated by Paul in 1:7.

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II. A second line that has been advanced views the gifts as not being for today because history proves that the gifts ceased with the apostolic age.

While this is both true and not true, to a great extent, gifts did cease in operation. But on the other hand, there were those who kept alive the gifts in various places, at various times, with various people. John Wesley, commenting on this phenomenon that the gifts seemed to have diminished after the apostolic age, said this, “Because of the love of money, almost of all Christians was waxed cold. This was the real cause why the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Ghost were no longer found in the Christian church.” That is Wesley’s view. Dr. H. A. Ironside, who was a great pastor in America, a non-charismatic, a non-Pentecostal, pastor of Moody Bible church in Chicago, ministering in the earlier part of this century, when a great many of his friends and colleagues in the ministry were against the charismatic renewal, had this to say about the gifts dying off after the apostolic age. He says, “Some insist that some of the gifts have absolutely disappeared. But I do not know of any Scripture that tells us that. I do not know of any Scripture that says the age of miracles has passed. I would not dare say that the sign gifts all ended with Paul’s imprisonment. I know from early church history that this is not true. These Corinthians came behind in no gift, we are told. And it seems to me, in the Book of Acts, that as time went on and as the church began to drift a little and as dissension and other things came in that grieved the Lord, there was more reservation on His part in bestowing the gifts. That I believe explains the lack of many of these gifts today. The church has gotten so far away and there is so much strife, division, worldliness and carnality, that He no longer delights to lavish His gifts upon her as He did at the beginning.” That’s Ironside’s view.

I’d perhaps not be quite as uncharitable. I’d recognize that many of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are non-charismatic do not have the gifts, not because they have drifted away from

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the Lord, but simply because they have come to believe that the gifts are not to be opened. And there is not a faith or expectancy or teaching which opens them. I cannot get away from a phrase from a figure who has really been the father of the modern charismatic renewal. He said, “My task is to demythologize the New Testament.” That struck a bell in me. I’ll have to explain why. That’s a very important word for New Testament scholars. The word “demythologization” is a phrase that is used by liberal theologians to explain away the miracles in the Bible. They hold that miracles in the Bible are a myth. And that, in order to read the Bible correctly, you must strip away the myth and get to the moral or spiritual truth that is therein revealed.

As an illustration of this, Barclay, in commenting on the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead, says, “Now, whether or not this miracle actually occurred makes no difference. The important thing is the story shows that Jesus has power over death.” He has demythologized, if you will, the gospel. The lesson is that Jesus has power over death. Strip away the story, it’s not important. My contention is, if you strip away the story, you don’t have the truth.

But it’s been explained, “When a miracle that’s described in the Bible occurs again today, we have demythologized the New Testament, because we have shown that it is not a myth after all. It still happens today. Therefore, the New Testament is not a book of myths. It’s a book of reality.” I like that view about the spiritual gifts. It’s a true view. The gifts did not die with the apostolic age. They’re alive today.

III. A third thing that’s been advanced: Some persons believe that gifts can’t be opened because the New Testament canon, the twenty-seven books, is now completed.

So ministry through the spiritual gifts is no longer needed. We have now the written Word. This view says, “The early church didn’t have the written Word so, therefore, they needed to go with

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spiritual gifts; as prophecy and the like. But when the Bible came in written form, the New Testament, the needs for the gifts no longer existed.”

Such a viewpoint is tremendously unaware of what was going on in the New Testament church regarding gifts. The utterances in the Early Church, the prophetic utterances and the utterances of tongues with interpretation, were not on the level of the authority of Scripture. In fact, they were subject to the judgment of others in the congregation. We’re, for example, told to test the spirits, to see whether or not they’re from God. We’re not told to test the Scripture, to see whether or not it’s from God. No admonition ever given will say, “Test the Scripture, to see whether or not it’s from God,” but the spoken gifts were always to be tested. And they were under the control of the persons giving them. When the Early Church faced a problem that needed an authoritative answer, they didn’t go to their prophets. They went to the Old Testament Scriptures, the Scriptures they had.

For example, in Acts 15, we’re told that the Early Church was debating the issue of whether or not to admit Gentiles without having them circumcised and become Jews in practice first. They did not, on that occasion, say, “Let’s see what the prophets have to say about this. Agabus, stand up and prophesy.” No, they finally came to the point where they asked, what did the Scriptures say? James, the leader of that group, quoted the Scripture. The Old Testament was their authority! Not a spiritual gift.

The idea that “the New Testament is now completed, we don’t need spiritual gifts” is a mistaken kind of position. It assumes that the spiritual gifts were filling the vacuum before the New Testament came. They weren’t that at all. The Early Church had the clear teaching of the apostles, the Word of Christ, the same Word we have today. Spiritual gifts were an augment to that preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ and how He went about doing good.

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IV. Another position that's been advanced, that the gifts are not for today, is that gifts aren't needed any longer.

I, even as a child, could never really see this. Even more today I have problems with this. The gifts, if they have ever been needed, are needed today. If ever people are broken and hurting and in need of the liberating power of Jesus Christ through the presence of the Spirit and His many gifted church, it is today.

There is a measure of truth to the fact that a culture that has experienced miracles, if they continue to harden themselves against the witness of Jesus Christ, God may withdraw that working of miracles. We know, in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus, that the rich man died, went to hell, and in hell he lifted up his eyes to Abraham and asked Abraham to send Lazarus or someone back to witness to his five brothers. The bottom line of Abraham's comment was, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31). God will not, on some occasions, work miracles because His written Word is already sufficient within that body of people.

V. Another argument which is advanced is: If the gifts are for today, why do many Christians not manifest them?

I think it may be the fact that there is a lack of spirituality and aliveness toward God in many cases. It's a lack of aliveness in faith to believe that these may be appropriated and used by the church of Jesus Christ today.

Sometimes, the gifts have not been opened because persons have believed that these gifts are simply a manifestation of natural talents. People who are teachers, therefore, should have knowledge. Knowledge being understood as an exercise of the ability to get into Scripture and understand it. Or wisdom. Or that people who are more optimistic just naturally demonstrate the

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gift of faith. But such a view is to again misunderstand the functioning of the gifts. We'll look more at the delineation of the gifts in weeks to come. But they are supernatural impartations of God's grace which are given to His body at specific times. They are not natural. In other words, one cannot work himself into having one of the gifts. One's natural abilities and talents may correspond or complement the supernatural gift, but they are given from the Lord and they are supernatural in their working. We will see this in coming days.

There are two kinds of extremes to the charismatic renewal. One is "charisphobia." The other is "charismania." "Charisphobia" is the fear of the gifts. And "charismania" is to be so caught up in them that one ceases to have balance and to keep Jesus Christ as front and center. Paul writes, not to correct the charisphobia side of the church, but to correct the charismania of the church. He says they are ignorant about spiritual gifts. How could a church that was so rich in the expression of every spiritual gift be ignorant of them? I'm sure this must have been a question that Paul's listeners had in mind when the letter was read to them. How dare he accuse us of being ignorant when we have all the gifts functioning! How could we be ignorant of them?

This is the way Paul corrects them. He is talking to people now who misuse spiritual gifts. He says that one way that you are unaware is that you, in the body, are considering the gifts as competitive rather than complimentary. Especially for the Corinthians, tongues seem to be the gift which express spirituality. The utterance of tongues in public worship services seems to be a mark of spirituality and if you did not have that as a gift, functioning in the public worship service, you may be regarded as on a sublevel of the gifts at Corinth. Persons were evidently comparing themselves. This party spirit that was in the Corinthian church had worked itself also now in the expression of the gifts, competing gifts—"I have this gift, you don't this that gift, therefore, I must be more favorable to the Lord, more spiritual."

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This is not to be the case. Not all the gifts are given to just one person. Neither the nine gifts here or the gifts in Ephesians or Romans 12 (there's anywhere from nineteen to twenty-four spiritual gifts, depending on who counts them and which ones you count).

All the gifts are expressed in Christ's life, with the exception of tongues and interpretation. But who knows if in His own private prayer life He may have used that gift. All the gifts are expressed in Christ, but they're given to his body because no one person can fully express the person of Jesus Christ. All of us together express that. So the gifts are distributed in the body. No one person has them all. Each has something. The gifts are to be complementary rather than competitive. Because they're complementary, we can be at home with our gifts. While earnestly desiring the better gifts and earnestly desiring to employ the gifts, and at the same time, not coveting what someone else has and feeling like we're left out if we don't have that particular gift.

I like the story told by pastor Charles Swindoll about the group of animals who decided to improve their general welfare by starting a school. The curriculum included swimming, running, climbing and flying. The duck, an excellent swimmer, was deficient in other areas, so he majored in climbing, running and flying, much to the detriment of his swimming. The rabbit, a superior runner, was forced to spend so much time in other classes, that he soon lost much of his famed speed. The squirrel, who had rated A as a climber, dropped to a C, because his instructors spent too much time teaching him to swim and fly. The eagle was disciplined for soaring to the treetop when he had been told to learn how to climb, even though flying was most natural to him.

Another thing that Paul corrects at Corinth is not considering love essential to insure the proper use of the gifts. 1 Corinthians 13, as you know, is sandwiched between the two chapters on the gifts, because love should be front and center. Where gifts are front and center and they become

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spiritual showcases—“Look at us, at how spiritual we are”—then they’re not undergirded by love and they lose their power and their expression. No gift is effective unless it is undergirded by the power of love. No spiritual renewal or revival or work of the Spirit is enduring unless it is undergirded by love. Satan would even like to take a work of the Spirit, which results in the renewal and revival of His people, and cause them to become proud and say, “We are the church. We are the people that have experienced the mighty revival from God. What is wrong with you?” So that spirituality can become something to boast about. Have you ever walked into a church and had a first impression, after being there maybe one service, and said to yourself, “This is not a spiritual church.”

That may be a valid judgment. But, on the other hand, it may be coming from the standpoint of spiritual pride. Basically, it’s saying, “In one short moment, I’ve got this place all summed up.” That’s the kind of thing the Corinthians felt at home doing. Making snap judgments which were not undergirded by love. Love must undergird the gifts. Where there is not love, the gifts sound like brass and a tinkling cymbal, as Paul tells the Corinthians.

Another way the Corinthians were failing to use the gifts properly, and therefore they were ignorant of them, was that they were not regulating the gifts through proper order. There was a general state of confusion in the worship services. Several people were getting up and sharing all at one time and no one could hear. I can remember some days I’ve had in the South and Southeast part of our country, where in the testimony services, it was the practice of the church during testimony time to have three or four persons stand up at once and all simultaneously testify. You could not understand a thing that was going on. It simply needed order. That basically is what was happening at Corinth. A lot of people were doing their thing, getting

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blessed. But nobody was getting edified. It's one thing to be "blessed." It's another thing to be edified.

Paul says, "You've got to regulate these things. The spirit of the prophets are subject to the prophets. You need to take turns. You need to put a limit on the expression of the vocal gifts—prophecy and tongues. Two or no more than three in the service" (1 Corinthians 14:27). Too much is too much. People will become inundated. The sacred will become common place through its overuse. It will become misused. You need to regulate its order. That is, by the way, one reason why, generally after a gift is expressed in this congregation, I will take a moment to give a word of instruction concerning it. There is always, in every service, someone who has not been in a service where a vocal gift of the Spirit has been exercised before. It's really important to help them understand and appreciate and enter into what the Spirit of God is doing.

Another way that the Corinthians were misusing the gift was by not evaluating the appropriateness of the exercise of the gifts. For example, they were placing uninterpreted utterances of tongues on a very high level. Paul said, "That is of no worth to the congregation at all. Don't have uninterpreted utterances of the tongues in your services. If you are going to give an utterance of tongues, it must be interpreted." And, even at that, he seems to be saying, prophecy is the superior form of gift. But don't forbid to speak in tongues. Don't despise it. Don't forbid prophesying. Evaluate the appropriateness.

Sometimes the gifts do not resonate equally as well as another. But that's because the gifts are developmental. They don't come to us fully blown. We learn to function in the gifts. Let's make room for learning in the gifts. Let's not quench the spirit of someone who's just beginning to exercise the gift by saying, "That wasn't perfect." Allow room for growth.

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The Spirit of God can be entreated and is entreatable. I think we need to be sensitive to recognize that, not only can a gift be legitimate in its expression, but sometimes it may not be appropriate. Somehow, we need to recognize that, without it being a quenching of the gift. Where there the Spirit of God is, there's got to be liberty. There must be liberty and a fostering and encouraging spirit. I want to encourage you to express gifts in the Lord. I also want to say that the Scriptures give us the vehicle to talk about the appropriateness of the gift.

One other thing that Paul corrects at Corinth, in terms of ignorance of the gift, is that the Corinthians were evidently using the gifts as a barometer of spirituality. They're not that at all. I've unfortunately known some people who had great gifts but had little spirituality. The gifts are not a barometer of spirituality. That's where the Corinthians made their mistake. "Brother or sister so and so has this gift; they must be spiritual." It's true that a person who desires a gift and is exercising the gift may really indeed be walking in the Lord. But not always. Not necessarily. The true indication of spirituality is not the expression of a gift. The true indication of spirituality is the expression of fruit.

No one person has all the gifts. You may or may not know what your gifts are. I encourage you, if you don't know what they are, to begin prayerfully waiting before the Lord and say, "Lord, what gift have You given me that I haven't opened yet?" I can look at these gifts and identify certain ones that I have exercised. But when I look at the fruit of the Spirit, the nine gifts in the fruit of the Spirit, I find that the fruit of the Spirit is in the singular. Whereas, the gifts are in the plural. No one person has all the gifts. But every person is to have all the fruit, because it is "fruit"—singular. I don't go through the list in Galatians and say, "There's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Which one do I want to ask God for?" You can't do that with fruit. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is a complete personality that

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wants to come into your life completely with all His fruit. The Scriptures say, “By their fruit you shall know them” (Matthew 7:16). Not by their gifts. Don’t get in that trap of judging by gifts as to whether or not a person belongs to Christ. It’s, “By your fruit you shall be known and others shall know you.” Jesus said in Matthew 7:22–23, “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in Your name? Didn’t we drive out demons in Your name?’” and He’ll say, “I never knew you.” How can that happen? It’ll happen because they have the gifts without the fruit. And they were not of Christ. Satan can counterfeit and imitate spiritual gifts. And we can too. But Satan and we, on the natural level, are baffled to imitate the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit cannot be imitated. It is unique. It is a manifestation of the character of Christ.

Paul does a beautiful thing in talking about the gifts in another passage, Ephesians 4:7. And talking about the foundation of the gifts. He quotes an Old Testament psalm about the enthronement of God, the coronation of God as king. That’s Psalm 68:18, “When He ascended on high, He led captives in His train and received gifts from men.” Get the picture for a moment. You’re in a coronation hall. God is enthroned. There are captives, the people He has liberated following Him. When He sits down, the captives give Him gifts. That sounds logical, doesn’t it? When someone has a coronation, you would expect the lessers—the vassals—would give the greater—the king—gifts.

Paul quotes from Psalm 68:18 and Ephesians 4:8, and he does a marvelous thing. He quotes two lines out of the Old Testament and then he changes a line and completely inverts its meaning. He says, “When Christ ascended on high, He led captives in His train and gave gifts to men.” The change is that instead of receiving gifts, He gave gifts.

What is the first thing Christ does when He ascends? He gives the Holy Spirit. He has every right to demand that we give Him everything. But in that moment, He’s still giving and He’s still

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giving. When He ascended on high, He led captives in His train—that is, the people whom He liberated are following Him. Then He turns around and He gives gifts. What gifts does He give to the church? The very gifts we'll be talking about, as well as the gifts in Ephesians 4 and Romans 12. He wants His supernatural ministry to continue in the world. The only way that supernatural ministry can continue is through His people. "Greater works," Jesus said, "shall you do than I" (John 14:12). Not greater in terms of "kind." I don't think you can do anything greater than raising a person from the dead. But greater in terms of extent. More. Longer years. More people involved. Greater.

Jesus is giving us gifts from His standpoint of being ascended in the place of all power. The first gift He gives, obviously, is the gift of eternal life. It's called a *charisma*—the gift of eternal life. Every Christian in that sense, who's born again, is charismatic, for we have all received the *charisma* of eternal life—Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death, but the *charisma* [the free gift is Jesus Christ] is eternal life through Jesus Christ."

If you have not started out at that level of receiving gifts, know today that Jesus is in a place of all power and authority, at God's right hand, and the first gift He wants to give you is the gift of eternal life. When you've received that gift, then He wants you to open a whole lot more, that you can be a dynamic, giving kind of person. And that we, as an entire body, can express the dynamism and the giving nature that Jesus has in His own heart.

Acts 1:1 says, "A former book I wrote you, O Theophilus, of all the things that Jesus both began to do and teach." The striking thing about that is that Luke says the whole gospel of Jesus Christ, from His birth through His ascension, is only the beginning of what Jesus did and taught. The Book of Acts, the story of the church and the story that goes on until now, is simply the continuation of what Jesus does and what Jesus says. We are Jesus' hands in the world. We are

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Jesus' eyes in the world. We are Jesus' voice in the world today. He wants His actions and His voice to come with spiritual power. That is why He has given the gifts.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord Jesus, we praise You because You are such a giving Lord. When You sit down at the place of all honor and authority, we would think that, from then on, You would become one who would make such incredible demands on us. Look at all You've done for us. And aren't we supposed to return it? And we're not being grateful and all these kinds of things. But Your love knows no limits. Your giving has no barriers to it. Out of Your abundance, You give and give again. Lord, there are persons here today who perhaps have never opened gifts which You have sought to give to them in their life. Maybe they haven't known that the gifts were available. Maybe they haven't known how to open such a gift. I haven't really told them how to do that today. But I pray, Lord, that an interest would awaken, a desire and a yearning, which is the foundation, on our side, of experiencing the gifts. It's the foundation by which Your sovereignty is expressed. You want to give the gifts, but your giving is limited to our receptivity of them, too. Awaken our receptivity to You, Lord. That in us there may be nothing lacking of which You seek to perfect. For those of us who felt we could never function in a gift of ministry and caring of any kind, because we're not spiritual enough, not good enough or too new of a Christian, help us to understand, Lord, that You take the weak things of the world to confound the wise and the mighty and the strong, and that You are pleased to give your gifts to Your people. For You want to turn us after Your own heart, not simply a person who receives but one whose fundamental nature is to give. So make our lives, Lord, outward bound—giving as Your Spirit lives in us. For the person here today who has not received the gift of eternal life through You, we pray that their heart would be open to receive the gift You are bringing and that life in You will be imparted.

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This can be done, even now as we pray, *and as You in the audience open Your heart to Jesus Christ by simply saying, "Lord, bring me the gift of Your presence come into my life. Come into my life."* Now, Lord Jesus, we thank You that Your Spirit has so graciously been with us this day. We praise You for the beauty of worshipping You. How You've spoken today to us! To our needs and aspirations and emotions and longing and our intellect, as well. We go forth now to do Your will, to be Your servants in the world, in Jesus' name. Amen.