

# THE SPIRIT'S POINT

by Ray C. Stedman

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In Chapter 12 of First Corinthians we are beginning a new and major division in this letter. Perhaps it would be helpful if I just briefly give you once again a quick survey of this letter (which is also addressed "to the Californians"), and we will remind ourselves of what it has covered. This is an easy letter to remember because its divisions are really only four-fold, so there are just four things to remember:

First, there is an introduction, the first nine verses, and there in that section you have the key verse of First Corinthians. In fact, it is the key to the whole of the Christian life. The apostle says right at the beginning,

**God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. {1 Cor 1:9 RSV}**

Now that is the whole purpose of the Christian life -- to learn to walk day by day, moment by moment, in the fellowship of the Son of God. That is where strength comes in the Christian life; that is where godliness comes; that is where love, grace, peace and joy are released to us.

The apostle immediately begins after that introduction -- in a long section that carries us clear through to Chapter 11 -- to deal with the carnalities, the things that threaten and hinder fellowship with Jesus Christ. There are a lot of them in this Corinthian church, but they can be gathered under three main headings:

- First, the apostle deals with pride and its consequences -- that spirit of self-reliance that wants to leave God out on the periphery of life and handle everything itself: "Please, Mother, I'd rather do it myself." That is the deadly enemy of Christian faith, and yet many an individual life in many church is afflicted by this terrible pride of human wisdom.
- Then he deals with a second major area, and that is lust and its problems. There we saw his practical, faithful dealing with immorality and sexual license -- a very forthright passage, and a very helpful section.
- Then he deals with life and its dangers, and there we learned that life is to be lived right out in the midst of danger; that we are not to hide ourselves from it, but we are to learn how to handle the dangers in a way that will enable us to resist the temptations involved and to glorify God.

That brings us to Chapter 12, where the apostle now turns from the carnalities to what he calls the spiritualities. Verse 1:

**Now concerning [and my version says] spiritual gifts [but actually that is not a good translation -- it has nothing to do with *spiritual gifts* directly. It is, "Now concerning the *spiritualities*" (spiritual matters)], brethren, I do not want you to be uninformed. {1 Cor 12:1 RSV}**

Beginning here, in Chapter 12 right on through Chapter 15, you have his teaching concerning the great positive forces of the Spirit that help us handle the carnalities and correct the wrong things that hinder fellowship with Jesus Christ:

- This chapter will deal with the first of these spiritualities, i.e., the gifts of the Spirit in the Body of Christ.
- Then Chapter 13, the great love chapter, deals with the fruit of the Spirit;

- Chapter 14 deals with order by the Spirit in the Christian assembly; and
- Chapter 15, the resurrection chapter, deals with glory by the Spirit.

So all that has to do with life in the Spirit. Then the closing section of the letter, Section 4, is what I would call the practicalities, and these take up matters like the collection, and how to relate to leadership, and so on. There is the whole sweep of the letter.

We want to begin with the spiritualities, in Chapter 12. This is an area which is of great interest to many today. You will recognize that when we start talking about spiritual gifts and the functioning of the Body we get into areas that are highly subjected to discussion and controversy and disagreement -- especially about the gift of tongues, which will come before us here.

It is amazing to me how quickly interest is aroused when you introduce a discussion on the gift of tongues. You can hardly gather with any Christian group today and start discussing some Christian leader before eyebrows begin to go up and people say to themselves, "Does he, or doesn't he?"

Well, we are going to come to the gift of tongues in due course -- it is one of many spiritual gifts that Paul calls *the charismata* that he will start dealing with in Verse 4 -- but before that are three verses that are extremely important to understanding this section. In fact, much argument would have been saved if people would give heed to these first three verses of the chapter which deal with the unmistakable mark of religious error, as opposed to the unmistakable mark of religious truth.

Now those are important verses, as you can see. The whole world is still scratching its head in bewilderment over the terrible tragedy at Jonestown in Guyana, connected with the People's Temple. People are asking how could such an awful thing happen? How do we know, they are saying, that some of the groups and cults and religious bodies that we are associated with ourselves will not ultimately lead to this kind of a tragic thing? Those are perfectly proper questions.

Well, the answer is right here in these first three verses, for here you have, in Verse 2, the unmistakable mark of religious error. How can you tell when a religious group that uses Christian terminology and sets forth the Bible as the great Word of wisdom, and seems to be Christian in every way, is not a cult that is going to end up the same terrible tragic circumstances we saw in Jonestown? Here is the answer.

Paul invites these Corinthians to look back and think of their life before they were Christian, and he says to them, Verse 2:

**You know that when you were heathen, you were led astray to dumb idols, however you may have been moved. {1 Cor 12:2 RSV}**

In that day, the cultural norms involved the actual worship of images; it was widespread in the 1st century world, and therefore it was the normal path that idolatry would take. Today, however, the images are gone but the idolatry remains, and it is still the mark of religious error. We have already seen, in the study of this letter, that idolatry is any concept or thing that begins to possess us, that exercises control over us, that begins to shape our thinking, and demands our time. Thus, a perfectly proper thing until it begins to possess us becomes an idol to us. But human beings were made to be possessed only by God, and that is a proper possession. When anything replaces that it becomes idolatry.

As we have already seen, this possession can be anything. It can be sports. Somebody quoted to me just this morning an article he read which said, "Tennis is not just a life and death matter -- it's much more important than that!" (We have been joking around among the staff about various sports to which some of our younger pastors are given. I keep telling them that basketball is sin, and skiing is a sin unto death!) But these things are harmless, of course, until they begin to possess you; then they can become idols. Sports, politics, recreation of many types, music, art, science, anything, whatever we live for, and under certain circumstances would even die for, that is the idol of our life.

Now, notice, the apostle says that involves a process of being led astray, which suggests a control factor, a power to which we are becoming subject, and we have already learned in this letter that behind idolatry is the power of mind-control exercised by demons. If your view of life does not involve the recognition of the presence of wicked spirits, yours is a quite different view than that of Jesus and the apostles. You may want to pooh-pooh that sort of thing, or you may be willing to accept it as being valid -- many are today, because they see so much evidence of it -- but it is clear universally in Old and New Testament alike that behind the visible structures of life is the invisible control of what Paul calls in Ephesians, "wicked spirits in high places" {cf, Eph 6:12b}, who exercise power over the minds of men and women. Darkness and death are the result, and this is what Paul is referring to.

Eventually therefore, all forms of idolatry, including these which we would think of today as rather harmless ones, become destructive of human life. We can see that easily in the madness that is associated with Jonestown, or the rise of Nazism in Germany during and before the last war {i.e., World War II}. It can possess a whole nation and lead them to do incredible things. It always ends up in some form of mass death, either physical, or social and pathological within. You can see it in Jonestown in the awful horror of seeing little children put to death by their own parents, their parents joining them in death a few moments later under the control of a demonic figure whom they accepted as a messiah and a savior. You can see it in various other manifestations of life today -- the madness of international conflict in war, the inability of human beings to set aside the forces that drive them to these wild and ungoverned exploitations of human life. This is indeed, as a film once put it, *A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* .

It is also evident in some of what are regarded as more harmless things. You can see this in the emptiness, the loneliness, the boredom of materialism, or of hedonism, the pursuit of pleasure. One of the revealing statistics in this regard is that every Christmastime suicides increase rapidly in number. Why is that? I think it is because of the binge of materialism on which people go. They hope to satisfy the aching of their hearts, the longing of their souls, the sense of desire for something fulfilling, by material gifts and things. They find sooner or later that it is all empty. We have all felt this. When you walk around the stores filled with shoppers and the bustle and hurry of Christmastime, every now and then there comes upon your spirit a sense of the emptiness of the material things of life. How lonely you can be at this time of year with a whole host of Christmas gifts that mean nothing! How cold and boring life can become! Now that is death, and it comes from the mind-control exercised by demonic beings who are in control of the philosophy and thinking of men and women all over the world. Out of that, Paul says, these Corinthian believers were delivered by faith in Christ. They came to life, love, peace, joy, warmth and beauty once again. He now invites them to think back to see how every path they were on led to that kind of death and to that kind of mind control -- and we must do the same.

It is the universal testimony of the Scriptures that man is subject to the influence of other spirits besides the Spirit of God, and Paul is giving us a way to tell who they are. They can use religious jargon, they can use Biblical terminology and practices, but they will lead eventually to some form of idolatry. And here are the marks of idolatry:

1. First, it is always a personality cult. Some leader lifts himself up as the focus of all interest and attention, and people following him find themselves having to give a form of adulation and worship to a man or a woman like that.
2. Second, it always involves some degree of regimentation and control. In order to enforce the personality cult there have to be certain demands made, certain limitations imposed, certain rights must be given up, certain liberties have to be set aside, and the power of the personality in charge is such that he or she enables people to voluntarily consent to giving up their rightful liberties. That is always true in religious error.
3. Then along with that comes certain claims of special and unique powers. Every group must feel that they have a unique mission, they have a special authority, a special power has been committed to them that marks them out as different from others, and that claim becomes the mark of idolatrous solicitation.
4. Then together with that invariably comes a stress on money and finances as the central power and need

of a group. Money is seen in terms of power as providing opportunities to fulfill desires and goals, and nothing can be done without it.

In the Christian Church money plays a part, but it is not the central emphasis. Any time even a Christian group begins to talk about having to have money before they can do something for God you know they are being influenced by demonic concepts, because you do not need money to do something for God. Anybody can start wherever he is and be used of God by the gifts of God and the power of God committed to him, and the money will flow in when it is needed. But it is never the central thing.

5. Then, of course, the final mark of religious idolatry is that it always creates unending jealousy and strife. You have groups like this constantly afflicted with internal dissensions, infighting, arguing, struggling for control, cutting down one another -- a total absence of all we seek to uphold in a Christian assembly: The love and affection of one for another.

Now in contrast to that, the apostle helps us to recognize the true mark of the Spirit of God at work. People are asking this everywhere today: "How do you know that the Spirit of God is really behind some of the manifestations that we're running into? Is the true Spirit of God behind the great healing meetings of today, or the demonstrations of tongues, or some of the other claims of religious leaders today?" Well, the apostle gives us the mark. He says,

**Therefore, I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, "Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. {1 Cor 12:3 RSV}**

There is how you recognize the Spirit of God at work. He came into this world to do one thing: To exalt Jesus Christ. That is all he does. Everything the Spirit does aims at that goal and that point. And he will never do anything else.

Paul puts it negatively and positively here:

First, negatively: No one who speaks by the Spirit of God ever demeans or in any way diminishes the centrality of Christ in the Christian life or in the Christian faith. The Person and the work of Jesus are always the central thing. I am sure that very few people today would ever say these words, "Jesus is cursed." Perhaps there are groups that would say that; some of the Satanist groups might. I am equally sure that in the 1st century this was common, especially in the synagogues and in Jewish organizations where Christ was seen as a threat to Judaism. It may be that Paul is referring to the fact that when he was a young, zealous rabbi -- Saul of Tarsus, breathing out threatenings and slaughters against the Christians -- he may have forced them to say these words. In his defense before Agrippa, in the book of Acts, he says he forced many among them to blaspheme, and it may be that this is the sentence that he tried to get Christians to say: "Jesus is accursed."

But you do not have to say those words to fulfill what Paul is saying here. Anyone, for instance, who says that Jesus Christ nothing but a mere man is virtually saying, "Jesus is accursed," because according to the teaching of the Bible the whole race is cursed; the curse of Adam's evil has come upon us all and twisted our inner life to make us self-centered and living for self-that is the curse. And it is universal, everybody is born with that inner drive to be the center of attention and to have the universe revolve around him. That is the curse. Now when you say that Jesus was nothing but a man, a great teacher, perhaps, a moral leader, whatever, you are saying that he too is part of that cursed race, that he was not free from it, although in the Biblical record it is the virgin birth that preserved him from that taint of sin. He was not under the curse of Adam; that is why he could be our Deliverer from it. Therefore, all teaching that puts down Jesus, that denies his deity, that says he is not the redeemer, that he too is nothing but a great teacher, is, in effect, saying "Jesus is accursed."

Now positively: When the Spirit is at work he always seeks to exalt and magnify Christ as Lord. "Jesus is Lord" was the creed of the early Church. The Romans attacked that. They tried to hold up Caesar as Lord, and in the early persecutions they made the Christians choose between saying, "Caesar is Lord," and they could be

delivered and set free, or, "Jesus is Lord," and they would meet the lions, or be burned at the stake. And to the glory of most of the early Christians, they held fast and gave up their lives rather than deny that Jesus is Lord.

Lord means "in charge of all human events." I think we Christians oftentimes subconsciously live less than Christian lives in this regard. We think Jesus is only going to be Lord when he comes back again and rules and reigns in triumph over the earth, when every knee shall bow and every tongue acclaim that he is Lord. But the truth that the Scripture sets forth, and the truth that the Holy Spirit always undergirds, is that Jesus is Lord; he is in charge now of all human events; he is the One who holds the controls of history, and everything that is reported in our papers today is moving at his will to a single point in history that he controls.

This is what Peter declared to the assembled multitudes on the Day of Pentecost: "Him whom you crucified, God has made both Lord and Christ," {cf, Acts 2:36}. This was what made the early Christians so fearless: "Jesus is Lord; he is already in charge of these people who are giving us trouble, and he will see how far they go and determine what they do with us, therefore we don't need to be afraid. Jesus is Lord." This is what the Holy Spirit everywhere manifests.

Today you hear all kinds of voices denying that:

Some voices say, "Science is lord." That is why it is spread in our day -- science is the hope and savior of the race, and only the wisdom of men of science can ever hope to work out all the knotty problems we wrestle with on this dark planet.

Other voices say, "Sex is lord," "Pleasure is lord," "Feeling is lord," "Money is lord," and all of them in one way or another are saying, "Man is lord; he is in charge of his own destiny."

It matters not how straight the gate,  
How charged with punishment the scroll:  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul.

Those sound like brave words, but, in the light of the revelation of the Word of God, they are ignorant idolatry, worshipping man in the place of the Lord Jesus Christ whom God has made both Lord and Christ.

Where the Spirit is at work, Christ will be glorified. This is the whole point of this passage. Jesus said, "When he is come he will not speak of himself; he will take the things of mine and make them known unto you," {cf, John 16:13-15}. Therefore, a group that makes much of the Spirit is not emphasizing Christian truth. It is the group that makes much of Jesus, and that exalts him, and sees that everything is focused and centered on him that will manifest the power of the Spirit of God.

Just to show how true this is, in the next two verses the apostle shows us that everything the church possesses comes from the Lord himself. Verses 4-6:

**Now there are varieties of gifts, [*charismata* here] but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service [or ministries], but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. {1 Cor 12:4-6 RSV}**

Notice the combination of variety with sameness -- that is the mark of God at work. God himself is a Triune God; there is one God, but he exists in three Persons. There is diversity in unity, and wherever you find God at work you will always find that mark: Diversity in unity. When the church is fulfilling its function, and is what it ought to be, you will find unity -- one Body, many gifts, many distinctions, many ministries within it -- but only one group, one Body in Christ. This is Paul's argument here: It all flows out of the nature of God himself.

Now notice what he says:

First, the Spirit will give gifts -- that is the Holy Spirit's task. He comes to every believer and he gives to

everyone without exception a gift or gifts of the Spirit, which Paul will go on to look at and which we will study in a later message on this passage. But these gifts are capacities to serve; they are abilities that are given to us by God himself.

Now isn't this interesting: Here at Christmastime we all look forward to seeing what gifts will be waiting for us under the tree (children especially are all agog, wondering what is in those gaily-colored packages), but the amazing thing to me is that God, at infinite cost, has given gifts to his people without exception -- nobody is left out, everybody has one -- and yet people can live for years and years of their Christian life and never ask themselves, "I wonder what my gift is?" Yet, a gift of the Spirit is a fulfilling thing; it is what turns life into an adventure and gives it a great sense of fulfillment and meaning. It is amazing how many Christians are content to live on year after year just barely struggling along as Christians and never enjoying it to the full, never getting excited, never getting turned on and aglow with the adventure and excitement of Christian living because they have never stopped to find out what gift God has given them. But there are the gifts, waiting for us at the cross, at the foot of the tree.

And the Lord Jesus assigns ministries, according to this passage. The word is *diakonia* -- the word from which we get *deacon*, and it means the opportunity to use your gift. The Spirit gives the gifts; the Lord Jesus opens the opportunities. The trouble is, we think they all have to come through the church, or through the leadership, that somebody is going to call you up and ask you to do something. No, nobody will. God will open a door for you. It will be in your neighborhood, perhaps; it will be at work; it will be while you are riding in the car; it will be with children or with older people. It will be some opportunity that will come right to your doorstep for you to use the gift of teaching, or helps, or encouragement, or ministry, or whatever it may be that God has given you, and there, that is an opportunity that the Lord Jesus has himself given you.

Just as he said to Peter after the resurrection: "Feed My Sheep" {John 21:16-17}, so he might say to you, "Feed my lambs," "Feed my sheep," or "Encourage my sheep," or "Evangelize out in the world," or whatever it may be. The Lord in the midst of his church directs those opportunities.

Then the Father, according to this passage, is in charge of the energizings, the workings -- there we are dealing with results. What is going to happen when you exercise your gift? Well, who knows? It may grow into a worldwide ministry; it has with some. It may be limited or obscure, but one thing is sure: it will be exciting; it will never be dull. It may be dangerous; it certainly will be demanding; but it will never be boring -- you can count on that because God is an innovative God, alive, and electrifying, and at work, and moving in these days.

These are tremendous days, and I feel sorry for the Christian who is not discovering what God has given him to do, and doing it with all his heart, discovering the excitement and adventure that life can bring and be when a Christian seizes the opportunity given by the Lord to use the gift given by the Spirit, and to depend upon the Father to bring the results. When you do that you are going to have something exciting taking place, and I hope that 1979 will prove to be a great year of discovering adventure to you in this regard.

Well, we have got a lot more to say about this as we go on in the passage. What a help this is to us to be able to understand the centrality of Christ in the whole of life as the Spirit has come to uphold him and support him. Not our centrality; as John the Baptist put it: "He must increase; we must decrease" {cf, John 3:30}, but the excitement and adventure of being co-laborers with God in the great work he is doing in the world today.

## Prayer

Holy Father, we are grateful that we can see all around us evidences, both negatively and positively, of the truth of these words. We see the same terrible forces, cosmic, darkness, at work in the world of our day; we see the awful power of the enemy to control the minds and thinking of people and lead them quite innocently and unaware into death, and bondage, and destruction. But we also see the mighty work of the Spirit of the living God, exalting the Savior, the Redeemer, the Lord Jesus, the Lover of mankind, and leading us to be a part of his work in this age in time. Thank you for the part we play. Help us, Lord, to discover it, and to rejoice and to be glad. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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