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Life in the Spirit #3

### Sermon Summary #3

#### **Faith, Healing, and Miracles: A Trio of Misunderstood Gifts 1 Corinthians 12:4-11**

I often tell young preachers and teachers of God's Word that much of their responsibility in communicating the truth of Scripture is wrapped up in first *deconstructing* and then *reconstructing* the beliefs of the people who sit under their ministry. What I mean is that most people come to a church service or a Bible study or a house church meeting with their belief system already pretty much in place. They don't know that, but if you pressed them you'd discover that they have values firmly entrenched in their hearts and doctrines deeply embedded in their minds, most of which are a reflection either of the way they were raised by their parents or are an expression of what they *want* to believe is true, even if it isn't.

Teaching God's Word involves first deconstructing a lot of those misguided and unbiblical beliefs. By "deconstructing" I mean the dismantling of those doctrines and ideas that are contrary to God's Word. That's not as easy as it sounds, because most people don't like to be told they are wrong. They can get pretty defensive when it comes to long-held and deeply-cherished beliefs. But deconstructing someone's false beliefs is only half the story. One must then reconstruct beliefs in accordance with what Scripture says.

Folks, nowhere is this two-fold task of deconstruction and reconstruction more applicable than in the case of two spiritual gifts mentioned by Paul here in 1 Corinthians 12. I'm referring, of course, to "faith" and "healing."

In fact, if you put those two words together to make "faith healing" or "faith healer" you have created an idea or a person that typically ranks down there with "bank robber" or "child molester" or "con artist." There is hardly a more vilified figure in the religious world than that of "faith healer."

Permit me to illustrate my point. This story was released just this past Tuesday, November 1. Dale and Shannon Hickman, members of the Followers of Christ Church in Oregon City, Oregon, were sentenced to 75 months in prison with three years of probation. Their crime? They refused to seek medical assistance for their son who was born two months premature and weighing less than four pounds. He died 9 hours after being born. Here is the exact wording of the press release:

"In the case of the Hickmans, when their baby's health began failing after his premature birth, the father responded by praying and anointing him with olive oil instead of seeking proper medical treatment. During the trial, prosecutors argued that the couple had ample time to get medical assistance after the premature birth of their baby. Pediatric experts testified that if they had done so, the infant would have had a 99 percent chance of survival" ([www.christianpost.com](http://www.christianpost.com), 11/2/11).

Needless to say, what these parents and other members of their church put into practice has very little if anything at all to do with true biblical faith or true biblical healing. To think that they might have appealed to 1 Corinthians 12 to justify their actions is abhorrent.

What that means is that I can't get very far with you today in addressing these two gifts, together with that of miracles, until I do a bit of deconstruction. So let me jump right into the middle of this.

#### *The Gifts of Faith and Healings*

Before I say anything about healing, a few words about the gift of faith are in order. Although the NT has much to say about "faith" in general, it doesn't explicitly refer to the *charisma* or gift of faith outside 1 Cor.

12:7-10. Therefore, the best way to identify and define the nature of this gift is to look briefly at how faith is portrayed elsewhere.

During our series in Mark's gospel, you heard me talk about faith in terms of three categories or three distinct contexts or circumstances in which faith is exercised: *converting faith* (the faith we exercise following the new birth and through which we are justified), *continuing faith* (the faith we exercise daily as an expression of dependence upon and confidence in God), and *charismatic faith*.

*Charismatic* faith is the faith noted in several texts that appears to be spontaneous and functions as the divinely enabled condition on which the more overtly supernatural activities of God are suspended. This, I believe, is the "gift of faith" in 1 Cor. 12:9. Some possible examples of the gift of faith are found in Mark 11:22-24; cf. Mt. 17:20-21; 21:21-22; 1 Cor. 13:2; and James 5:15.

Charismatic faith or the gift of faith, like the other *charismata*, is not given to every member of the body of Christ. However, it would appear that any member of the body of Christ is a potential candidate for the experience of this manifestation of the Spirit. The gift of faith should probably be regarded, more so than most other gifts of the Spirit, as occasional or spontaneous, rather than permanent or residential.

This is a special faith that "enables a believer to trust God to bring about certain things for which he or she cannot claim some divine promise recorded in Scripture, or some state of affairs grounded in the very structure of the gospel" (D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 39). In other words, it is the "God-given ability, without fakery or platitudinous exhortations, to believe what you do not really believe, to trust God for a certain blessing *not* promised in Scripture" (ibid.).

The gift of faith is that *mysterious surge of confidence* which rises within a person in a particular situation of need or challenge and gives an *extraordinary certainty and assurance* that God is about to act through a word or an action.

I believe there is a close connection between gifts of healings (as well as the gift of miracles) and the gift of faith which immediately precedes in Paul's list of the *charismata*.

The role of faith in healing is crucial, but what precisely is a person supposed to believe or in what or whom are they to have faith?

I believe that faith for healing operates at any one of five levels. There is, first of all, *faith that God is your sole source for blessing, that he alone is your hope* (see Pss. 33:18-22; 147:10-11).

Secondly, there is *faith in God's ability to heal*. Jesus took special delight in healing those who were open and receptive to his *power* to perform a mighty work. In Mt. 9:28-29 Jesus asks the two blind men only if they believe he is *able* to heal them. He wanted to find out what they thought about him, whether or not they trusted his *ability*. "Yes, Lord," came their response. "Be it done to you according to your faith," and they were instantly healed. Jesus regarded their confidence in his power to help them as "faith" and dealt mercifully with them on that basis.

The leper in Mt. 8 said to Jesus, "Lord, *if you are willing, you can make me clean*" (v. 2). The leper didn't question Christ's ability. He trusted that completely. He did have doubts about the willingness of Jesus to do it. But Jesus didn't rebuke him for such doubts, as if it were a shortcoming in his faith that might jeopardize his healing. He healed him because of his confidence that he *could* do it (cf. Mark 5:34).

Third, there is *faith in God's heart for healing*. This is *faith in God's goodness and his desire to bless his children* (see Ps. 103:1-3; Luke 11:11-13). This is faith or belief or confidence that it is God's character to build up, not tear down; to bring unity, not division; to create wholeness and completeness, not disintegration and disarray. People came to Jesus for healing because they knew they would find in him someone who would understand their pain, their frustration, their grief, their confusion. Their healing flowed out of their personal encounter with a caring, loving, person.

Fourth, there is *the faith not simply that God can heal, not simply that God delights to heal, but faith that God does heal*. This is the *faith that healing is part of God's purpose and plan for his people today*. You can believe God is able to heal and that he delights to heal and still not believe that healing is for the church today. For example, I believe that God is able to make manna fall from heaven to feed his people. I believe that God delights in providing food for his people; he doesn't want them to go hungry or to starve. But I do not have faith that God does, in fact, intend to send manna from heaven as a means of providing our physical needs. Therefore, I will not spend time praying that he do so.

Fifth and finally, there is *the faith that it is his will to heal right now*. I have in mind the psychological certainty that healing is what God is, in fact, going to do now. This is probably more of what Paul had in mind when he spoke of the gift of faith in 1 Cor. 12:9. It may also be what James referred to as "the prayer of faith" (James 5:15). So let's turn our attention to that passage.

*James 5:13-18*

"*The prayer of faith*" isn't one that we pray whenever *we* want to. It is a unique prayer, divinely energized only on those occasions when it is God's sovereign purpose to impart a gift for healing. James was careful to place the definite article ("the") before both "prayer" and "faith" (hence, "*the* prayer of *the* faith"). One prays *this* prayer only when prompted by the Spirit-wrought conviction that God *intends* to heal the one for whom prayer is being offered. This is more than merely believing that God is able to heal; this appears to be faith that he, in this particular case, is not only willing to heal, but plans to heal *right now*. Only when God wills does God sovereignly bestow the faith necessary for healing. When God chooses to heal, he produces in the heart(s) of those praying the faith or confidence that such is precisely his intent. The particular kind of faith to which James refers, in response to which God heals, is not the kind that we may exercise at our will. It is the kind of faith that we exercise only when God wills.

When I was pastoring in Ardmore, quite a few years ago, a young couple came to me before the service and asked that the Elders of our church anoint their infant son and pray for his healing. After the service we gathered and I anointed him with oil. I don't recall the precise medical name for his condition, but at two weeks of age he had a serious liver disorder that would require either immediate surgery or, more likely, a transplant. As we prayed, something very unusual happened. As we laid hands on this young child and prayed, I found myself suddenly filled with an overwhelming and inescapable confidence that he would be healed. It was totally unexpected. Not wanting to be presumptuous, I tried to doubt, but couldn't. I prayed confidently, filled with a faith unshakeable and undeniable. I said to myself, "Lord, you really are going to heal him." Although the family left the room unsure, I was absolutely *certain* God had healed him. The next morning the doctors had no explanation for a liver that was functioning perfectly. He was totally healed and is a healthy twenty-year-old young man today.

If this was an example of the "gift of faith" working in conjunction with a "gift of healing" there is no reason to think that had I prayed for another afflicted infant boy that day he would necessarily have been healed. The fact that I received a gift for healing on this one occasion is no guarantee that I may pray with equal success on some other occasion.

Let me make three additional comments about this passage in James 5.

First, James speaks clearly about the relationship of *sickness to sin* in v. 15. He says that "*if* he [the sick man] has committed sins, they will be forgiven him" (v. 15). James agrees with Jesus (John 9:1-3) and Paul (2 Cor. 12:1-10) that not all sickness is the direct result of sin. Sometimes it is (see 1 Cor. 11:27-30; Mark 2:1-12), but not always. The "if" in v. 15 is not designed to say this man may *never* have sinned. The meaning is that if God should heal him in answer to prayer, that's an indication that any sins of the sufferer, which might have been responsible for this particular illness, were forgiven. In other words, if sin was responsible for his sickness, the fact that God heals him physically is evidence that God has forgiven him spiritually.

Second, the sin James has in mind may be that of bitterness, resentment, jealousy, anger, or unforgiveness in our relationships with one another, or conceivably any number of sins we may have committed against

God. Hence, James exhorts: “confess your sins to one another, that you may be healed” (v. 16). He probably has in mind either confessing to the person against whom you have sinned, or confessing to another believer your more general transgressions or violations of biblical laws. What this tells us is that God has at times chosen to suspend healing mercy on the repentance of his people.

Third, take careful note of *the example of Elijah* (vv. 17-18). The argument has been made by some that biblical miracles were clustered or concentrated in only three major periods of history: the days of Moses and Joshua, the time of Elijah and Elisha, and the time of Christ and the apostles. The point of their argument is that Elijah and Elisha, for example, were special, extraordinary, unique individuals who cannot serve as models for us when we pray.

But James says precisely the opposite! The point of vv. 17-18 is to counter the argument that Elijah was somehow unique or that because of the period in which he lived he could pray with miraculous success but we cannot. James wants us to know that *Elijah was just like you and me*. He was a human being with weaknesses, fears, doubts, failures, no less than we. In other words, James is saying: “Don’t let anyone tell you Elijah was in a class by himself. He wasn’t. He’s just like you. You are just like him. Therefore, pray like he did!”

Don’t forget the context: *James appeals to the example of Elijah to encourage us when we pray for the sick!* The point is that we should pray for miraculous healing with the same faith and expectation with which Elijah prayed for the end of a three-year drought.

I’m now ready to make what may sound like an outrageous statement: There is no such thing as “the gift of healing.” There never has been. Let me explain.

I say this both because of the way Paul describes this spiritual phenomenon and the misconceptions surrounding it. The significant thing about 1 Cor. 12:9,28 is that both “gift” and “healing” are plural and lack the definite article, hence the translation: “*gifts of healings*”. Evidently Paul did not envision that a person would be endowed with one healing gift operative at all times for all diseases. His language suggests either many different gifts or powers of healing, each appropriate to and effective for its related illness, or each occurrence of healing constituting a distinct or separate gift in its own right.

I’ve had the opportunity on numerous occasions to meet people who have what appears to be a healing anointing for one particular affliction. Some are able to pray more effectively for those with back problems while others see more success when praying for migraine headaches. This may be what Paul had in mind when he spoke of “gifts” of “healings”.

One of the principal obstacles to a proper understanding of healing is the erroneous assumption that if anyone could *ever* heal, he could *always* heal. But in view of the lingering illness of Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25-30), Timothy (1 Timothy 5:23), Trophimus (2 Tim. 4:20), and perhaps Paul himself (2 Cor. 12:7-10; Gal. 4:13), it is better to view this gift as subject to the will of God, not the will of people. Therefore, a person may be gifted to heal many people, but not all. Another may be gifted to heal only one person at one particular time of one particular disease.

When asked to pray for the sick, people are often heard to respond: “I can’t. I don’t have the gift of healing.” But if my reading of Paul is correct, there is no such thing as *the* gift of healing, if by that one means the God-given ability to heal everyone of every disease on every occasion. Rather, the Spirit sovereignly distributes “a” *charisma* of healing for a particular occasion, even though previous prayers for physical restoration under similar circumstances may not have been answered, and even though subsequent prayers for the same affliction may not be answered. In sum: “gifts of healings” are occasional and subject to the sovereign purposes of God.

Few doubt that Paul had a “gift” for healing. But his prayers for Epaphroditus weren’t answered, at least not at first (see Phil. 2:25-30). Clearly, Paul could not heal at will. Aside from Jesus, no one else could either! And there is doubt if even Jesus could (read John 5:19; Mark 6:5-6). Some would conclude from Paul’s failure to heal his friend that “the gift of healing” was “dying out” at this juncture in the life of the church (in spite of the fact that late in his ministry, in Acts 28:9, Paul apparently healed everyone on the

island of Malta who came to him). It seems better to conclude that healing, whenever and wherever it occurred, was subject, not to the will of man, but to the will of God. No one, not even Paul, could always heal all diseases. If Paul was distressed that Epaphroditus was ill, almost unto death, and that initially his prayers for him were ineffective, I doubt seriously if the apostle would have drawn the same conclusions that modern cessationists do. Paul understood the occasional nature of gifts of healings.

The fact that healing is an expression of divine “mercy” (Phil. 2:27) means that it should never be viewed as a “right”. Healing is not the payment of a debt. God does not *owe* us healing. We don’t deserve healing. I believe we should have faith for healing. But there is a vast difference between faith in divine mercy and presumption based on an alleged right.

The word “mercy” is the same one used in the gospels to describe why Jesus healed people when he was on the earth. God’s motive for healing hasn’t changed! The primary reason God healed through Jesus prior to Pentecost and why he continues to heal after Pentecost is because he is a merciful, compassionate God. God is no less merciful, no less compassionate, no less caring when it comes to the physical condition of his people after Pentecost than he was before Pentecost.

So why doesn’t God always heal the sick? I would like to suggest that the reason why many are not healed may possibly be answered in any one of seven ways.

(1) Although we must be careful in giving more weight to the role of faith than does the NT itself, we also must be willing to acknowledge that occasionally healing does not occur because of the absence of that sort of faith that God delights to honor. This does not mean that every time a person isn’t healed it is because of a defective faith or that if only a more robust and doubt-free faith were in exercise that healing would inevitably follow. But it does mean that faith is very important (see texts cited above).

(2) Sometimes healing does not occur because of the presence of sin for which there has been no confession or repentance (see the earlier discussion of Js. 5:15-16). Again, please do not conclude from this that each time a person isn’t healed it is because he/she has committed some specific sin of which they have refused to repent. But in some cases (not necessarily all) this is undoubtedly true.

(3) Although it sounds odd to many at first hearing, healing may not happen because the sick *don’t want* it to happen. Jesus asked the paralyzed man in John 5:6, “Do you want to be healed?” What on the surface may appear to be a ridiculous question is, on further examination, found to be profoundly insightful.

Some people who suffer from a chronic affliction become accustomed to their illness and to the pattern of life it requires. Their identity is to a large extent wrapped up in their physical disability. I realize that sounds strange to those of us who enjoy robust health. Why would anyone prefer to stay sick? Who wouldn’t jump at the opportunity to be healed? But I’ve actually known a handful of folk who in a very real sense enjoy their dependence on others and the special attention it brings them. They are convinced that the only reason people take note of them and show them kindness and compassion is because of their affliction. If they were healed they fear losing the love on which they’ve come to depend. Remaining sick is to their way of thinking a small price to pay to retain the kindness and involvement of those who otherwise would simply ignore them. Then, of course, in some instances people don’t want the responsibilities that would come with being healthy. To their way of thinking, it’s easier (and perhaps even more profitable) to remain the object of other’s beneficence and good will than it would be to be healthy and thus expected to get a job and show up 9-5 on a daily basis. This is not a common phenomenon, but it does happen in a few cases.

(4) We must also consider the principle articulated in James 4:2, where we are told that “you do not have, because you do not ask.” The simple fact is that some are not healed because they do not pray. Perhaps they pray once or twice, and then allow discouragement to paralyze their petitions. Prayer for healing often should be prolonged, sustained, persevering, and combined with fasting.

(5) Some are not healed because the demonic cause of the affliction has not been addressed. I’m not suggesting that all physical disease is demonically induced. Consider the case of the woman in Luke 13 “who had a disabling spirit [or, a spirit of infirmity] for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not

fully straighten herself" (Luke 13:11). According to Jesus, "Satan" had "bound" her (Luke 13:16; see also Acts 10:38). It takes considerable discernment, time, and patience to determine if an illness has a demonic cause, together with even greater commitment to praying for that individual and leading them to address the reasons for their spiritual oppression. When these factors are ignored, healing may not be forthcoming.

(6) We must also consider the mystery of divine providence. There are undoubtedly times and seasons in the purposes of God during which his healing power is withdrawn or at least largely diminished. God may have any number of reasons for this to which we are not privy, whether to discipline a wayward and rebellious church or to create a greater desperation for his power or to wean us off excessive dependence on physical comfort and convenience or any number of other possibilities.

But what must we say when the problem isn't the absence of faith or the presence of a demon or the refusal to repent or the failure to pray or a lack of desire? How then do we account for on-going physical affliction?

(7) Often times there are dimensions of spiritual growth and moral development and increase in the knowledge of God in us that he desires more than our physical health, experiences that in his wisdom God has determined can only be attained by means or in the midst of or in response to less than perfect physical health. In other words, healing the sick is a good thing (and we should never cease to pray for it), but often there is a better thing that can only be attained by means of physical weakness.

More important to God than our physical health is our spiritual holiness. This isn't to say the body isn't important. God isn't a Gnostic! He values and has redeemed our bodies and now dwells within them as his eternal temple. But while we live in this corrupt and decaying world, inner and spiritual conformity to the image of Christ often comes only at the expense of or at least simultaneous with physical deterioration and suffering (see 2 Cor. 4:16-18).

If I believe Romans 8:28, that God sovereignly orchestrates all events in my life for my ultimate spiritual good (and preeminently for his ultimate glory), I can only conclude that, all things being equal, if I'm not healed it is because God values something in me greater than my physical comfort and health that he, in his infinite wisdom and kindness, knows can only be attained by means of my physical affliction and the lessons of submission, dependency, and trust in God that I learn from it.

In the final analysis, we may never know why a person isn't healed. What, then, ought to be our response? In the first place, don't stop praying! But why should Paul bother to pray for release from something that God wills to inflict? The answer is because Paul didn't know what God's will was in this particular case until such time as God chose to make it known. And neither do you or I with regard to any particular illness that we may suffer.

If the Lord had never said in response to Paul's prayer, "No, it isn't my will that you be relieved of this thorn," Paul would have been justified, indeed required, to continue to pray for his healing. I once heard my friend Jack Taylor put it this way: "Never cease praying for healing until you are shown otherwise either by divine revelation or death!" If you are able to discern, as did Paul, through some prophetic disclosure or other legitimate biblical means that it is not God's will now or ever to heal you, you may cease asking him to do so. Otherwise, short of death itself, you should persevere in prayer. You never know but that God's ultimate and long-term will for you is complete healing after he has for a season accomplished his short-term sanctifying purpose.

In Paul's case, the only reason he ceased asking for deliverance was because God, in effect, told him to shut up! "No, Paul. I'm not going to heal you. It isn't my will in this instance that you be set free from this affliction. Rather, I have a higher purpose in view: your humility and my Son's glory manifest in the context of your on-going weakness." To which Paul, in effect, replied: "O.K., Lord, I'll shut up and submit to your merciful purpose in my life. I know you love me and desire what is ultimately of greatest good for my spiritual growth. Therefore, my prayer now is that you maximize in me the beneficial effects of this pain. Don't let me miss out on any spiritual good that might come my way from this malady. Teach me

everything I need to know and sustain me that I might be a platform for the glory of Christ and a source of comfort to other suffering saints.”

Finally, we must be willing to bear the stigma of perceived failure. We have succeeded when we have obeyed the Scriptures to pray for the sick. Whether or not they are healed rests with God.

John Wimber once said, “I decided long ago that if one hundred people receive prayer and only one is healed, it is better than if none receive prayer and no one is healed” (*Power Healing*, xviii). I agree.

### *The Gift of the Working of Miracles*

The most literal translation of Paul’s words is “workings of powers” (*energemata dunameon*). Although all gifts are "workings" (*energemata*) or "energizings" by divine power (cf. vv. 6,11), the word is used here in conjunction with "powers" (*dunamis*) for a particular gift. As you can see, the word often translated "miracles" is actually the Greek word "powers" (*dunamis*). Thus we again have a double-plural, "workings of powers," which probably points to a certain variety in these operations.

What are these "workings" or "effectings" or "productions" of "powers"? It seems unlikely that Paul would include "healing" in the exercise of this gift. That isn't to say that healing isn't a miracle. Rather, it's simply to say that Paul would not unnecessarily repeat himself. Whereas "healings" are certainly miraculous, the gift of "miracles" must primarily encompass other supernatural phenomena as well. Simply put, whereas all healings are displays of "power", not all displays of "power" are healings.

Several possible manifestations of divine power may be included in what Paul means by "workings of powers" or "miracles." Consider the following:

- See Acts 9:40 where Peter raises Tabitha/Dorcas from the dead (although even this is a "healing" in the strictest sense of the term).
- See Acts 13:8-11 where Paul induces blindness on Elymas. One might also include here Peter's word of disciplinary judgment that resulted in the immediate death of Ananias and Sapphira.
- Perhaps nature miracles would be included here, such as turning water to wine, stilling the storm on the sea of Galilee, reproducing food, and causing the rain to cease (or commence), as with Elijah.
- Perhaps supernatural deliverances (exorcisms) are in view as well.

Conclusion: