

In our Epistle reading for today, I want to focus on verse 4, which says this: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit." What would you say is the most important word in that verse? Many of us might say, "Varieties." "Varieties" is a big word, after all, and big words are always the more important words. And it's also a positive word. We like variety. We like things to be different. We don't want the same thing over and over again. So "varieties" must be the most important word. But if that's the case, then what is Paul talking about in this passage? Well, he must be talking about different gifts, right? We all have different gifts from God. We all receive something different. And that's a real common idea that we hear even in the world, because how many times you hear people talking about things that make us different? Things that make us special or unique? So that must be what Paul is talking about! All of these wonderful differences between us.

But if that's the case, let's go on and see how it relates to everything else. He says, right after our reading, in verse 12: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." So now he's turned to talking about unity, the unity which we have as the body of Christ. How does that relate to what we were talking about before? How does that relate to the differences between us? Well, maybe he's just talking about differences, and now he's talking about what we have in common. Okay, maybe that would work. But then he says three verses later, verse 15: "If the foot should say, 'Because I'm not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body." Now he's talking about divisions, divisions so severe that some people think they're not even part of the body of Christ. What does that have to do with the differences between us? How does that relate at all? And then, of course, you go on to chapter 13, that great chapter talking about love that we hear all the time at weddings. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not envy or boast, and so forth. But that doesn't seem to have anything to do with it at all. So what's Paul doing here? Is he just going along talking about things that have nothing to do with one another, the way that a child might talk? That can't be the case, because he's pretty serious here. He's trying to make a very serious point. No, the trouble is that we started with the wrong word. We focused on the wrong thing in verse 4. And that's why we need to go back to it once more.

"Now there are varieties of gifts," Paul says, "but the same Spirit." The important word there is not "varieties." The important word there is "same." Yes, we may have different gifts, but we have the same Spirit, the same Lord. Because Paul is not celebrating these differences between us, the way the world so often does. Paul is talking to a congregation deeply divided over the issue of spiritual gifts. One person has this gift from God, and this other person has this other gift. But the first person is looking down upon the second, saying that "I don't really need you. I don't really have any use for you. I'm just fine all by myself. You have nothing that would benefit me." So the great problem, Christians, is spiritual pride.

Because God indeed gave gifts to his Church, some of them quite miraculous, in fact. In those days, he gave the gift of healing to some people, the ability to touch someone or to speak a word and to heal them of all their diseases, just like Jesus had done. We see this, for example, with Peter in Acts chapter 3, when he says a word and a man who cannot walk gets up and starts walking again in Jesus' name. That was a very great gift that God had given. Or other people who had the gift of tongues, the ability to speak in a language they did not know. It'd be like if I got up here right now and started speaking to you in fluent Chinese. I know nothing about that

language. I've never studied it in my life, but if I were to start speaking it as if I was a native speaker, that was the gift of tongues. A very great gift from God. Or even the interpretation of tongues, to be able to understand that language even though I'd never studied it. All wonderful and powerful gifts of God, the kind of thing that anybody would marvel at. It'd impress anybody.

But some of the gifts that were given were not nearly as impressive. A gift like wisdom, for example, or a gift like knowledge. And because they weren't as impressive as the other ones, it was causing division. Because think of it this way, Christians: if you had one of those great gifts from God, what would you think about yourself? If you had the gift to heal somebody with a touch, what would you think about yourself? If you had the gift to speak in a language you had never studied in your life, what would you think about yourself? If you could call down fire from heaven or say when it was going to rain, what would you think about yourself? Or more importantly, what would you think about your brother who couldn't do these things? That's the danger of spiritual pride, the danger of thinking that I don't need you because I'm so much better.

Now, I do want to be clear here. Paul is not putting all of these gifts on to the same level. He's not saying they're all equal to each other, because we might come away with that impression. No, there is such a thing as a higher and a lower gift. Paul even says as much in verse 31 when he says: "Earnestly desire the higher gifts." The gift of performing miracles, for example, is obviously much greater than the gift of wisdom. But God does not give these gifts equally, nor does he give them all the same to each one of us. But if I have one of these gifts, how am I using it? Am I using it in the service of someone else, or am I using it in service of myself, to puff myself up so that I feel good about myself? Are we tempted to say: "I don't need you, because I'm just fine on my own."

Take some of those gifts, for example, gifts that God still gives today. A gift of wisdom, the ability to know very clearly how God wants me to live as a Christian, to take God's Word and to apply it to my life very clearly. That would be a great gift. Do I use that gift to help others see how to live as Christians just as clearly? Or do I use it for myself, so that other people will look at me and say how holy and righteous I am? How do we use the gift? Or take a gift of knowledge, a deep understanding, a deep knowledge of the Scriptures, that I would be able to tell you anything about the Scriptures just by pulling it right out of my head. That would be a very great gift from God. But do I use that gift to help others learn more about God, learn more about Jesus? Or do I use it as a way of having people notice me so that they will be amazed at how much I know? How do we use the gift? Or the gift of distinguishing between spirits, the gift of discernment, being able to tell what is right and what is wrong, especially in a very difficult situation. That would be a very great gift from God. But do I use that gift to help others get through their own difficult situations? Or do I use it like a club so that I can win arguments on the Internet or in conversation? How do I use that gift? Because this is what Paul is talking about, the great danger of spiritual pride, using what God has given to me for my own benefit rather than the benefit of other people.

But spiritual pride is not found just in these gifts either, Christians. It's a very real danger for all of us, no matter how many gifts we may have. Spiritual pride leads us to think that I don't need anybody else, that I can do just fine on my own. Spiritual pride leads us, for example, to not talk to certain people in the congregation. I tolerate them being there. I tolerate them being a part of

the congregation, but I just don't want anything to do with them. That's spiritual pride. Spiritual pride also leads us to treat church as something that I only do when I feel like it. I'll go when I want to, instead of seeing it as an important part of what it means to be a Christian. That's spiritual pride. Spiritual pride can also lead us to forget about those outside the church, to think that we have our little group right here and that's good enough. We don't need to worry about anybody else. We don't need to bring them in. We'll be just fine. That's spiritual pride. And it's always a real danger for us, Christians, one that we must always be on guard against.

So that's why Paul focuses on that word "same" in verse 4 of our reading. Because the way to deal with spiritual pride, Christians, is to see that we have the same Lord, that we have the same Spirit. We are not made to be alone. It is not good for us to be alone as Christians. We are made to be one in the same Spirit, one in the same Lord. And God gives his gifts to his Church so that we would be one. This is why he says in verse 7: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." That's why he gives them: for the common good, for the good of us all. One is given wisdom so that they can help others learn to live like Christ. One is given knowledge so that they can help others to learn more about Jesus. One is given discernment to help warn others against hidden errors and hidden sins. These gifts are given for the good of the entire Church. And even if we don't have one of those gifts, even if our gifts aren't that spectacular, even if we can't work miracles, we still need each other. Because we were made to be one in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Because think about Jesus, Christians. Jesus had great gifts, but he didn't fall into spiritual pride. Jesus had great wisdom, even as a child, when we hear about him in the temple that "all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers." A 12-year-old boy wiser than all the teachers there that day. But he used that wisdom to call us to himself, to call us to turn towards him. Jesus had great knowledge. He knew the Scriptures inside and out, so that the "Jews marveled, saying, 'How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?'" But he used that knowledge to teach us the way of truth, to lead us to himself. And Jesus also had great discernment. He knew how to tell what was right and what was wrong, even when the Jews tried to trip him up on it. But he used that discernment to show us the way of the truth, to call us to himself.

And now, Christians, united in him, we are called to love one another, to use our gifts for one another as Jesus has first done for us. Because we need each other. We are all in this together. Jesus has made us one in the Holy Spirit. We are one church, one body in him.

So let us not be proud, Christians. Let us use our gifts in the service of one another, because we are one in the same Lord, one in the same Spirit. Our gifts may be different, yes, but they all serve the same purpose: to make us all perfect, to stand perfect before Jesus Christ on the Last Day. Let us not think that we can do this on our own. We need each other. So let us seek the still more excellent way of love in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have made us one in your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to know that we need one another in him and to use the gifts that you have given in the service of each other. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.