

How to Unwrap the Gifts of the Spirit this Pentecost

By Andy Otto



On **Pentecost** Sunday, God breathed the Holy Spirit into the apostles to remind them that they were not alone. Jesus had died, risen from the dead, and ascended into heaven. Jesus' followers were afraid and unsure of their future. The Holy Spirit came to comfort them even though Jesus wasn't there to physically comfort them anymore. What does the Holy Spirit mean to us today? Much the same thing it meant for the apostles. We too are recipients of the Spirit, given to help us in our lives. According to Judeo-Christian tradition, there are seven Gifts of the Spirit: wisdom, understanding, right

judgment, knowledge, courage, reverence, and fear of God. The best part is that you don't have to be religious to use them. These gifts are not beyond us or waiting to be found. They lie within each person waiting to be retrieved and used. And they can be reordered to act as a kind of guide to living out one's life and making decisions. Who doesn't need a little help with that?

Awe (Fear of God)

This is the gift that comes to us when we see the beauty of God's creation around us: a child splashing in a puddle on a sun-soaked day, the beauty of nations coming together in peace at the Olympics, the grandeur of a snow-capped mountaintop. The gift of awe lets us see God in all things. It gives us that feeling of hope for our life and world. Maybe I get that feeling when I hear a good song, and I sigh feeling grateful for all God has given me. This is where our lives should start.

Reverence

That awe brings me to my knees in reverence. It's a moment of surrender, like sharing a moment of awe with a friend — words fall quiet. There are no words to describe what you're experiencing. With the challenges of everyday life, the gift of reverence places God immediately in our lens. "Do not let your hearts be troubled," Jesus said. Suddenly we can find in our hearts a real trust and reliance on God. We want to be holy and live a better life! Anxieties and fears seem to melt away. Remember, this gift exists within us already. The only way to let it emerge is by pausing and being attentive to how awe-some creation can be (see previous gift). When this happens, reverence moves us to desire something greater, beyond us, and to find deeper meaning. It's like falling in love.

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Knowledge

The first step in finding deeper meaning in our lives is gathering knowledge. As with someone we're falling for, we want to know more about them, to go deeper. We have late nights on the phone asking questions and getting answers. Humans are information gatherers. Some might Google for answers to hard questions: How do I find my purpose? How do I decide on a school or job? How do I meet new people? In our knowledge gathering, we might tend to ask "how" questions and be bombarded with many different answers. Knowledge in some sense lets us see things the way God sees them. Consider the Tree of Knowledge in the Genesis story. By eating the apple Adam and Eve gain raw, un-sugar-coated knowledge. The harsh realities of the world come into focus.

Wisdom

But so much data and knowledge can seem like a lot to sort through. That's only half of the picture. The gift of wisdom is not about the head; it's about the heart. The Book of Wisdom says, "She is a breath of God's power ... She is a reflection of eternal light, a perfect mirror of God's activity and goodness ... she enters the souls of holy people ..." (Wisdom 7:25-27) Wisdom is about seeking the deep Spirit within, breathed into us at the beginning of our lives. She reveals our inner talents and desires and lets us pause discerningly. If I've gathered knowledge about a particular life decision I can now look deeper and let Wisdom show me what my inner feelings say.

Understanding

Knowledge and wisdom work together to inform the gift of understanding. After being bombarded by conflicting messages in our world we can use what knowledge and wisdom showed us to begin to understand the right way to live. What do we do when we hear things like, "Use contraception!" "Don't use contraception!" "Go to church!" "No, pray at home!" "Spend!" "Save!"? The gift of understanding is a blessing and allows us to know, at least on the surface, the right way to live out our lives — in a way that is life-giving.

Right Judgment

Understanding needs a final check though. We may have listened to our head and our heart and made an initial decision. The gift of right judgment is true guidance by the Spirit. It helps us make prudent decisions, like Jiminy Cricket:

The Blue Fairy: You must learn to choose between right and wrong.

Pinocchio: Right and wrong? But how will I know?

Jiminy Cricket: How will he know?

The Blue Fairy: Your conscience will tell you.

Pinocchio: What are conscience?

Jiminy Cricket: What are conscience? I'll tell ya! A conscience is that still small voice that people won't listen to. That's just the trouble with the world today.

There's a Jiminy Cricket within each of us, guiding us.

Courage

Once you've tapped into the gifts of knowledge and wisdom, gained greater understanding, and listened to the inner voice of right judgment (all this can be called discernment), nothing will happen without the gift of courage. Courage is required to make hard decisions. Life has many challenges and the Spirit gives us the gift of courage to overcome fear and obstacles, to take risks, and move forward. Consider the courage required by those risking death to stand up for religious freedom around the world. Or the risk Jesus took to stand up for what is right and true. Courage is our advocate, pushing us to put our discernment into action. And sometimes we have to accept rejection when we stand up for what the Spirit has revealed to us through the previous six gifts.

God has given us the Gifts of the Spirit not as some distant idyllic treasure, but as practical abilities built into our souls. They help us live and act and move through our lives every day with the guidance of God, always making careful choices, always striving to be the person God wants us to be.

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