

Unwrapped Gifts – Gifts of Grace

1/21/18 - Pastor Randy

Romans 12:3-8

Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us. Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.

In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

Before I focus on some of the key points of this passage I want to make some preliminary comments: The gifts listed in this passage are not explicitly referred to as spiritual gifts or gifts of the Holy Spirit. However, it is still correct to view the Holy Spirit as the giver of these gifts for a couple of reasons. First of all, the overlap that exists between this list and the gift list in 1 Corinthians 12, where the Holy Spirit is explicitly identified as the giver of the gifts, supports the notion that these gifts are from the Holy Spirit. We should also keep in mind that the whole Christian life; worship, prayer, witness, service, and the development of godly virtues and Christ-like attitudes and affections are always motivated by the Holy Spirit and only effective through the Holy Spirit. I love the way Gordon Fee expressed it when he wrote:

The Spirit as an experienced and empowering reality was for Paul and his churches the key player in all of Christian life, from beginning to end. The Spirit covered the whole waterfront: power for life, growth, fruit, gifts, prayer, witness, and everything else.

Second, this list of gifts should not be viewed as exhaustive but representative of a multitude of gifts provided for us by the Holy Spirit. This is supported by the fact that Paul made no attempt to specifically define the gifts and by the fact that there is overlap among the various gift lists. Even more indicative of the fact that this is not an exhaustive list is the general nature of the gifts mentioned. Serving, showing kindness, leading, and giving

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can be expressed in a variety of ways. For example, you might have the gift of teaching adults but not be gifted at teaching children. Some people have the gift of mercy for addicts but not necessarily for the sick and elderly.

I. Everyone is gifted.

That is different than simply stating that everyone has “a” gift. Paul was not intending to communicate that each individual is limited to one gift, but that each individual has a gift. No one is left out. Everyone is gifted to contribute to the health and growth of the church. The question is not, “Are you gifted?”, but, “Which gifts has God given you?”

Paul has two main concerns in this passage as I see it. He is not so much concerned with providing his readers with a detailed and systematic explanation about all the gifts God has given His people, and how they can discover them and develop them, although most books and teaching on the gifts tend to be preoccupied with those issues.

Paul’s first concern is with the failure to use the gifts for the right purpose. His second concern is that his readers might simply fail to use them at all. Paul addressed the first concern by stressing the need for humility in respect to our gifts.

II. The gifts need to be utilized from a posture of humility.

Paul wrote: “Don’t think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us.”

Humility allows us to gain a proper understanding of our gifts and abilities, our strengths and weaknesses. There is danger in thinking too highly of ourselves or thinking too little of ourselves. Believing you have gifts you don’t actually have will lead to problems, but so will demeaning or dismissing the gifts God has given you!

Humility will enable you to honestly seek counsel from those who know you and to discover the truth about your strengths and weaknesses. The humble are able to receive criticism or correction without becoming defensive or becoming discouraged.

Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ’s body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.

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Once we discover we are gifted we are vulnerable to the sin of pride which feeds a competitive spirit that strives to be better than others. Humility eradicates this competitive spirit. The humble man or woman does not seek to separate or distinguish themselves from their brothers and sisters because they understand they are 'one'. They belong to each other. The humble derive their sense of self-worth from their relationship with God rather than their position among their peers.

Facebook & Instagram have become vehicles which expose our sinful inclination to look better and be better than others. Users often experience a sense of elation or deflation based the number of "likes" they receive or how they measure up in comparison to other friends and followers. Social media platforms are not evil in and of themselves. They can be used for good but they serve as great illustrators of our hunger for attention and adoration.

Humility recognizes these are gifts of grace and therefore, there is no basis to boast about any of these particular gifts. That they are attributed to grace means they are unearned or unmerited by us. With gifts of grace there is no cause for boasting. Yet our value, our self-worth and significance is nevertheless established by the fact that God has gifted us. The cross of Christ crucifies my ego while confirming my value. The gospel of grace eradicates and obliterates all boasting and all self-belittling.

We need to possess a proper, sound assessment of our own gifting and humility is essential to achieving that. Humility is not thinking poorly of yourself. Humility is not thinking less of oneself, but thinking about oneself less.

After stressing the need for humility Paul gives emphasis to the purpose of the gifts God has given them.

III. Your gifts are not primarily for you!

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are not like the "gifts" we get at Christmas time or on our birthdays. Those gifts are given TO us FOR us. The gifts of grace described here are given TO us but they are not FOR us. They are gifts that God has given to us to use to serve the needs of others, especially to serve

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the needs of the body of Christ, the church. As we do the church will become all that God wants it to be.

These gifts are for us in this sense. We are blessed, we are honored, we are privileged to be used by God to enrich and edify others.

We have four men from our church – hopefully soon to be six – that spend about an hour every Tuesday mentoring a group of seventh grade boys in Cheltenham. Last Tuesday I showed them a brief video documentary about the founder of a non-profit called “Charity Water”. Scott Harrison was raised in a Christian home in the Philadelphia area. In his late teens he rebelled against the faith he was raised in, moved to NYC and pursued the life of a rock star. His rock band didn’t survive long, but he quickly became successful as a club promoter. He was living the dream of many 20 something males. He was making lots of money, enjoying lots of illicit pleasure, and experiencing the thrill of fame. But after a while he became disgusted with the person he had become. In his online testimony he says he was “spiritually, morally and emotionally bankrupt.” Hungover during the day he started reading the bible and theology. He came across the verse in the letter of James that says true religion is to care for widows and orphans and to keep oneself unpolluted by the world. He says, “I was 0-2”. I hadn’t done anything for the poor in ten years and I literally pollute the world. I get people wasted for a living.” He made a complete 180 degree turn and decided to give one year to serve the poor and needy. He signed up to volunteer with Mercy Ships where he spent a year working with a Doctor in Liberia who performed surgeries to remove grotesque and sometimes life threatening facial tumors. While serving with Mercy Ships Scott became exposed to the desperate need for clean water among so many millions around the world. In 2006 he founded Charity Water. In the past 11 years Charity Water has funded over 24,000 water projects providing over 7 million people with access to clean water.

After showing the boys the video clip I asked them to choose the better way to live between Scott’s old party life in NYC filled with money, pleasure and fame and his current life working night and day serving the poor. Which was a better use of his leadership and organizational gifts? I was thrilled to hear them all affirm the later. Jesus was right: It is better to give than to receive.

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IV. Your gifts need to be unwrapped and put to use.

In verse 6 Paul tells us that the gifts we have been given must be put to use! This is Paul's main point. His focus was not on providing instruction as to how his readers could discover your gifts – as beneficial as that might be. Neither did he give detailed definitions of these gifts and explanations as to use them. His concern is that they actually use them.

So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you.

That phrase is a little bit challenging to interpret in the original. I believe it is best interpreted to mean that when someone exercises the gift of prophesy, it should be consistent with the Christian faith.

If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

These are very simple statements that can all be summed up by the statement, "Take the gifts God has given you, unwrap them, and use them!!" Do not put them on the shelf somewhere. Do not squander them. Do not neglect them. Do not belittle them. Do not ignore them. Do not diminish their importance. Do not demean them. Do not be too lazy, too shy, too selfish, or too important to use them for the good of God's church, His people.

You and I are gifted and you and I are responsible to put our gifts to work for the glory of God and the good of others. If you are one of those people who feels clueless about your gifts, I have two words of advice:

1. Ask the people who know your best what gifts they see in you.
2. Begin to serve wherever God has provided you the opportunity, asking God to show you what gifts he has given to you. We discover our gifts through serving more often than we discover our service through gifting. In other words, gifts are best discovered and developed in the context of serving.

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