

Using Our Gifts for God

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Introduction.

- A. Just as we look around this assembly this evening, we see pretty quickly that it is not a group of similar people. We come from different backgrounds, we have different levels of education, we have different likes and dislikes. We're all here, though, because we are united by the death of Christ, which transformed us from separate individuals into a single body that has been dedicated to doing His will.
- B. As we try to work out the will of Jesus, this great span of individual difference that appears to keep us apart is actually one of the greatest assets to our work. Because we are different people with different abilities, we are able to contribute different things to the Lord's work. I know that many of you are terrified of public speaking, that you can't imagine that I do what I do twice a week. To me, though, preaching a sermon is no big deal. What intimidates me is the thought of things like doing the monthly duty roster or keeping track of the church finances. I do not have a head for practical details, brethren. I wish they would all go away and leave me alone and let me think about something interesting, like the Bible. I could serve in that way if I had to, I guess, but I would be every bit as miserable as the person with stage fright up here preaching a sermon.
- C. It's not coincidence that all these different people with different gifts ended up in the same body, brethren. Instead, the Lord has designed the church in this way, so that as we come together, we are capable of accomplishing a work for Him that none of us could do on our own. Every one of us, because of our unique blend of interests and abilities, has a place in this work. Paul discusses precisely this topic in Romans 12:6-8. We don't have the gift of prophecy anymore, of course, but the rest of those divinely given gifts are still very much with us today. God expects the same thing from the gifts He has given us as He expected from the Christians two thousand years ago. Let's look this evening, then at some ways of using our gifts for God.

I. The First Three Gifts

- A. The first gift that Paul mentions after prophecy is the gift of ministry, or **SERVICE**. One of the peculiarities of the denominational world is the way that they've elevated the word "minister" into a title, when in fact, it refers to even the lowliest kind of work that one human being can do for another. People don't naturally like to be servants. You don't see the CEO's of major corporations trailing around behind the janitors and helping them out in their spare time. Just about everybody would rather be on the receiving end rather than the giving end of their service, and people who naturally go around looking to help others are rare indeed.
- B. What we learn from the Bible, though, is that people who like doing for others aren't soft in the head. Instead, they have been blessed by God with the gift of service. We see Jesus' own comments on service in Luke 22:25-26. Every Christian needs to look to serve others, but for those who serve at the gift level, they need to understand that their gift, even if few in the church ever notice it, is actually giving them the opportunity to imitate Jesus in a way that few other Christians ever match. Paul tells us that the key to this imitative service is serving. In other words, service needs to be understood not in terms of potential, but in terms of action. If we have been given the ability and inclination to serve others, we need to be out there using our gift as much as we can, even when service gets hard. It's comparatively easy to show up with a casserole when somebody's dad dies; it's much less easy to put in the time, day after day, month after month, of doing quiet, behind-the-scenes work for people who need help. If we're natural-born servants, let's use that gift for God.
- C. Next in line, Paul mentions the gift of **TEACHING**. As with all of these, God expects every Christian to be able to teach when the situation arises, but this passage refers to those who have the ability to teach at the gift level. Some folks are just naturally good at presenting ideas to others in an immediately understandable way. I still remember my Wills, Trusts, and Estates professor in law school, Professor Johansen. He was an older guy, but he had a gift for turning an auditorium lecture class into a fun, engaging experience. At one point during the year, he actually got up on the desk in the front of the lecture hall and danced on it so that we would remember the legal subtlety he was talking about at that time. Sadly, that had its downside. He prepared the class so well for the final that everybody understood it, and in law school, only the top 25% of the class gets an A-range grade. Because everybody understood the material, the curve was super-tight, and I got a B- that ended up costing me my chance to graduate with honors. Not that I'm bitter or anything.
- D. Thankfully, in the Lord's church, we are not graded against each other. God does not admit only the top 10 percent of Christians to heaven. That means that it's in all of our best interests that our gifted teachers teach as well as possible. A passage that advises us how to do exactly that is 1 Timothy 1:3-5. Let's pay attention to the contrast that Paul makes here. On the one hand, you have those who teach fables and endless genealogies. Sadly, there are still brethren in the church today who spend their time focusing in on obscure things just like those, things that don't really matter. On the other hand, though, you have the kind of teaching that Paul urges on Timothy: teaching that causes godly edification in faith. As teachers in the

kingdom, that's what our focus needs to be. The Bible is a real, practical, meaningful thing. When we turn it into this abstract mishmash of logic and principles, we lose the meaning of it. Instead, let's look to teach the things that are practical and matter, so that our listeners know what they need to be and do to please God.

- E. The third gift in Paul's series is the gift of **EXHORTATION**. This one is a little bit different from the gift of teaching. When we teach, we tell someone something they didn't know already. By contrast, when we exhort, we're doing what Peter calls "stirring up by way of reminder." We're encouraging someone to do something that they already know about but maybe aren't doing the way they should. To be honest, folks, most of what I do in the pulpit is exhorting. It's not news to any of you that you need to study your Bibles or avoid the sins that Satan puts in front of you or work for the Lord. However, we all need to be encouraged.
- F. This exhortation can certainly come in sermon form, but it can also be dealt out in more private ways. A sister, for instance, who has this gift of exhortation will never stand before the assembly. However, she can still pay attention to who's there and not there, who's trying to stretch themselves in service to God, and who's just plain down in the dumps. Then, she need only say a sentence or two to inspire her brethren to persevere in serving God. We see a description of exhortation and its consequences in Acts 11:22-24. Barnabas came to Antioch, rejoiced in the good work the Christians there were doing for God, and encouraged them to keep on doing what was right. As a result, a great many people were brought to the Lord. That's one of the main ways that a person gifted with the ability to exhort will show up, friends. Because that encouraging disciple is busily encouraging away, all the other people with all the other gifts do their jobs better. If we know that we have the gift of exhortation, let's not waste it. Let's use it to get all the members of the body working fully.

II. The Second Three Gifts.

- A. Following exhortation, Paul brings up the gift of **GIVING**. Now, this is not normally an activity that makes our list of "works people do in the church." We know that everyone is supposed to give. However, it is still true that some have been blessed with the opportunity to give at a higher level. Not only do they have a generous spirit that moves them to give, but they have also been given the financial resources to contribute meaningfully to the Lord's work and helping others. Just like God expects results from all the other gifts He distributes, He expects results from this one. He wants to see these brethren give generously.
- B. Paul explains what this entails in 1 Timothy 6:17-9. Those who are rich in this present age have been given the opportunity to convert their earthly riches into treasure laid up in the First National Bank of Heaven. I understand the temptation here. Though I'm certainly not rich, at least by modern American standards, I understand the temptation to hoard my money so it keeps me safe. Paul says that's pointless. We need to trust in God, trust in Him to protect us and care for us, and use our wealth to become rich in good works. Now, this is not to say that we should send off our fortune to anybody who mails us a picture of a starving child in Africa, but we need to wisely use the material blessings that we have been given to help God's work.
- C. After this, Paul turns his attention to the gift of **LEADERSHIP**. Leadership IS one of the things we ordinarily think of as a gift, and we recognize its presence in all those who are leaders in the church: primarily elders, but also deacons and even lowly preachers like me. We see Paul's thoughts on how Christian leadership is to work in 1 Peter 5:2-3. Many people in the world have got the idea that leaders do their best leading from behind, pushing and browbeating their followers into obedience. That's exactly the opposite of the way that leaders in the church are supposed to work. Instead, church leaders lead by example, not just by talking the talk, but by walking the walk, by living such a righteous, humble, godly life that they inspire others to be like them. This is the only way that they can build up the moral authority they need to get God's results.
- D. It's interesting, though, the way that Paul says the gift of leadership is to manifest itself. Many of Paul's applications are unsurprising. All of us could have guessed that a servant is supposed to serve and a giver is supposed to give generously. Paul also tells us, though, that a leader is supposed to lead with diligence. It's just inevitable that sooner or later, a leader in the church is going to yell "Follow me!" and charge, only to look back and discover that no one is actually following. Even when we provide the best example in the world, people aren't necessarily going to follow it. I'm here to tell you, friends, that times like that can be very discouraging. What the man of God has to do, then, is to pick himself up, brush himself off, and look for the next opportunity to lead. People will disappoint us. We just have to make sure we don't disappoint God.
- E. Finally, Paul exhorts those who have the gift of **MERCY**. To be honest, folks, I had trouble fitting this one into place at all. I couldn't figure out how mercy was a gift, or how being merciful was a part of the work of the church. What finally got me on the right track, though, was when I started thinking about church splits. At least in most of the church splits I'm familiar with, doctrine wasn't the problem. The problem was that someone, somewhere, wasn't being merciful. They wouldn't overlook the perceived wrong being done to themselves, they wouldn't accept imperfection or opposition in another, or they just plain wouldn't let bygones be bygones. That, friends, is where the giftedly merciful fit in. They're the ones who are merciful themselves and teach others to show mercy, just as Paul advocates in Ephesians 4:31-32. This is important both in dealing with individual problems and church problems. It is essential in maintaining the unity of the spirit.

Conclusion. If you want to put your gifts to work for God, why not start tonight?