

THE BENEFITS OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS

SERIES: "NOW CONCERNING SPIRITUAL GIFTS..."

by **Ron Ritchie**

In the early seventies I was invited by Eff Martin to meet with a group of about fifty single adults to consider teaching a series of messages on the new covenant, using 2 Corinthians 1-6 as my text. This singles group had been meeting in a local restaurant for several months. I was told their purpose was to provide a non-threatening atmosphere where their friends from the marketplace could come and hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. I met with them and found them well-organized: The gifts of leadership, administration, serving, helps, and giving were all in place and working very well. What they needed in order to round them out as an outreach ministry were the gifts of teaching, faith (vision), and evangelism.

We began to work together. Some of the men and women already knew what gifts God had given them, and they were employing them in this new ministry. Others who were either new Christians or Christians who had not been taught about spiritual gifts were willing to help out in whatever way they could, with the hope that in time their gifts would be identified by their fellow workers. I came for a six-week series and stayed fifteen years.

That outreach ministry, which was called Careers Alive, grew because those faithful single men and women believed and lived out 1 Peter 4:10-11: "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen."

In God's time we established five other Careers Alive ministries around the Bay Area, where hundreds of single adults attended each Sunday. Only the Lord knows the many who not only came to Christ, but discovered their spiritual gifts and entered into our ministry. Only eternity will reveal the many who met their mate at Careers Alive, were married and began their families, and then went on into the multiplicity of ministries here at PBC, elsewhere in this country, and even around the world.

Once we got all our spiritual ducks in a row, one of the greatest joys I had in that ministry was to walk into the large room that held some four hundred people, and find the food, lesson, hospitality table, program, and music teams all in place---which left me with just one responsibility: to have a seat and wait my turn within the morning program, then be invited by the person with the gift of leadership to come to the podium and use my own spiritual gifts of pastoring/teaching and evangelism.

In our last study we were given a word of exhortation from the apostle Peter to become good stewards of the spiritual gifts God has given us. Now we want to look at a word of encouragement from the apostle Paul as he reminded the Roman Christians of the benefits of spiritual gifts when they are expressed by men and women who are living in and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Think with sober judgment

Romans 12:1-3:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God---this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is---his good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome from the city of Corinth in 57 A.D. The Roman church had already been established before Paul came on the scene (see Acts 2:10). The apostle was anxious to visit these dear people, as we can see in his statement to them: "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong---that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (Romans 1:11, 12). Now, Paul didn't have a bag full of spiritual gifts that he was giving away, for only the Holy spirit gives gifts to men (1 Corinthians 12:4,11). Rather, he was saying that he wanted to use his spiritual gifts to encourage them in their faith, and he hoped they would do the same for him.

Paul had already set out their spiritual position in Christ Jesus (Romans 1-8) and the place of the Jews in the plan of God (Romans 9-11). Then he continued in Romans 12:1-8 with his desire to keep the body of Christ spiritually healthy by encouraging the various members to not only know about their spiritual gifts and their place in the body of Christ, but to express them in a spirit of humility. In this immediate context the apostle was showing what the spiritual response of believers should be once they understand God's love for them: "...Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God...Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...." (Romans 12:1b, 2a). Then finally, in the spirit of humility produced by the Holy Spirit, they should begin to minister with their spiritual gifts to the other members of the body of Christ and to the world around them.

"For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." The Roman church may have struggled with the problem of self-importance because they were located at the heart of the Roman Empire. So Paul wrote to them out of a spirit of humility, letting them know that he himself was not the center of the universe, but a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. Humility opens our eyes to see all that God is doing in and through others around us. Paul recognized that he was saved by grace and that it was the grace of God that imparted to him his spiritual gifts, which were also to be expressed in a spirit of love and humility (Romans 12:9).

When the apostle wrote to Timothy some twenty-seven years later, he stated that he understood that God had appointed him to be (at least) a preacher of the gospel, an apostle, and a teacher (2 Tim. 1:11). All three of those spiritual gifts were speaking gifts, and thus he was placed in the forefront many times in his ministry. Unless he wore a coat of humility, he could begin to be tempted to think more highly of himself than he ought. So Paul was speaking to himself as well as to the Roman Christians as he reviewed the spiritual necessity for all believers to think neither too highly nor too lowly of themselves, but rather with sober judgment, "in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." We are to get a true estimate of ourselves from the word of God as we walk in the sight of God and among God's people. We are to use God's measuring stick to evaluate our measure of faith (the variety of ways in which we can use our gifts to be a blessing to others). God has given you and me a certain measure of faith to trust him not only in our personal lives, but also as we seek to express our spiritual gifts. Sober judgment asks, "How can I make the best use of my time, talents, and spiritual gifts so as to benefit the church of Jesus Christ and the hurting community around me?"

A few years ago I asked a humble young single businessman from our Careers Alive ministry if he would like to join a discipleship group Ed Woodhall and I were starting along with six other men. He prayed about it and accepted our invitation. Over the next two years we met every Tuesday night to pray for one another, study the word of God, and minister among single adults. During our time together we discussed the subject of gifts, and he began to discover as he ministered among us at Careers Alive that he might have the gifts of leadership, teaching, and mercy. At the same time he grew in love for a young woman, and in time I had the privilege of marrying them.

They eventually moved to the state of Washington, where he worked as a salesman and ministered at a local church. God blessed them with a lovely home, two children, and a good job. But this young couple began to give sober judgment to their lives, and decided to trust God to move them into a place where they could use their lives, time, and spiritual gifts in a more beneficial way. They are now directing the ministry and personnel

of the Mercy Ships that travel around third-world countries offering medical care as well as the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is not the call of God for all of us, but they began their new journey with the Lord by giving sober judgment to their new lives and spiritual gifts, and that is what we are all called to do.

If we want those around us to receive the benefits of our spiritual gifts, we need to be of sober judgment as we move out into the body of Christ, with the understanding that there is...

Diversity within oneness

Romans 12:4-5:

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

The first thing Paul wants us to look at here is our own physical bodies. We are to note that we have just one each. The second thing he wants us to look at is that within our one body there are many different but very necessary members which do not all have the same function. If any one of those members were eliminated or injured, the whole body would be handicapped in some way. Therefore, we are encouraged to understand and value the importance of the different members of our body and their usefulness to the whole. We should also enjoy the fact that our body's parts are not in competition with each other!

Having used our physical bodies to illustrate the spiritual principle of diversity within oneness, the apostle then turns to the mystical body of Jesus Christ, made up of men and women from every generation since the day of Pentecost in 33 A.D. Paul wants to remind those beloved Christians that God has called them to a ministry of diversity of spiritual gifts within oneness. The mystical body of Jesus Christ is where every member receives their spiritual gifts and their place to express them, either within that body or in the world. Diversity within oneness is enjoyed when each member of the spiritual body is dependent on the others and all members are dependent on their living Lord Jesus, who is the head, to use them to his honor and glory and to their personal joy.

When I was a young Christian without the knowledge of spiritual gifts, I thought that it was necessary for me to be "the baby at every dedication, the bride at every wedding, and the corpse at every funeral." I was a mess as I ran around from one event to another trying to get on center stage. And why not? Didn't I have all the ability in Christ Jesus? And wasn't competition part and parcel of the human condition? Then when I began to understand a little bit about spiritual gifts, I thought that if I didn't have all of them, perhaps at least I had most of them. At that point in my young Christian life, I found myself wanting to do everything for Jesus to my honor and glory and occasionally to his. What a loose cannon I was within the body of Christ! It is only the loving and faithful ministry of many, many godly men and women who pray and watch over me that keeps me walking in the spirit of this verse.

The benefit of the spiritual gifts within the mystical body of Jesus Christ is that each member can participate in expressing the love and power of our risen Lord Jesus toward the others for their spiritual edification, in contrast to fleshly competition, which results in jealousy, anger, and pride. Paul now illustrates this diversity within oneness by encouraging the Romans to look at some of the spiritual gifts they are already employing and enjoying within their ministry.

Vive la difference

Romans 12:6-8:

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

Let me make a few comments before we look over this partial list of spiritual gifts. First, remember that each believer has already received their spiritual gift(s).

Second, the question naturally arises, "How do I discover my spiritual gift(s)?" First, pray to God and tell him you are looking for opportunities that would help you open up your spiritual gift(s). Then in the power of the Holy Spirit simply begin ministering in every open door you can find. Join with others who are ministering and tell them you are looking to discover your spiritual gifts, and you would appreciate it if they would keep an eye on you as you work with them. For example, join folks when they visit prisons, hospitals, rest homes, Green Pastures, CityTeam, and Habitat for Humanity in order to see if you have the gift of service, helps, or mercy. Become part of our Sunday School staff, look into the possibilities of serving on the staff of our junior and senior high school ministries, and visit the college and singles ministries in order to see if you have the gift of teaching, administration, leadership, or discernment. Show up, look around, read the bulletin, and when you are led by the Holy Spirit, step into the next opportunity for ministry by faith. In time the Lord by his grace and in concert with fellow believers around you will begin to confirm the gifts you already have. Then you will have the spiritual wisdom to bring your gifts into focus in ministries in which you can best edify other members of the body of Christ.

Third, regardless of what spiritual gift(s) we have, we are all called upon by the Lord to serve one another and the communities in which we live when a special need arises, even when our specific gifts are not needed. You may have the spiritual gift of mercy but be asked to help unload a truck full of furniture. Don't tell those who ask, "I'm sorry, but I have only the gift of mercy, so please see if you can find someone who has the gift of helps!"

After discovering their spiritual gift(s) the Roman Christians were encouraged to begin using them in concert with one another. They were not to wait until they became spiritually mature to express their gifts, but were to begin where they were in their spiritual pilgrimage, looking for opportunities to use them by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Paul now lists seven of the twenty spiritual gifts that are identified in the New Testament. Many Christians have asked, "Why didn't Paul list all the gifts in one of his letters?" We need to keep in mind that the apostles had already taught this subject to the new churches. When the apostles Paul and Peter mention them in their letters, we find that they present only a partial list of gifts because they are using them as illustrations to support teaching on a deeper problem. For example, Paul wrote to the Romans, as we have seen, addressing the need for sound judgment in their new life in the Lord and in the use of their gifts (12:3). In Ephesians Paul was addressing the need to preserve the unity of the Spirit (4:1-16), and in 1 Corinthians he was addressing the problem of competition (12-14). Then some thirty years later the apostle Peter assumed that the believers in Asia Minor had been well-taught on this subject by Paul and Timothy, so he simply wrote, "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of prophecy (in Greek, propheteia). This is the spiritual ability to speak forth the mind and council of God, instructing the heart and moving the will to action. Prophets in the Old Testament were used by God to speak to Israel about current and future events. The prophets in the body of Christ were called to speak forth the word of God about current and future events (see Acts 2:17-18, 11:27-28); to equip the saints for ministry (Ephesians 4:11); to edify, comfort, and encourage believers within the body of Christ; and to reveal the secrets of men's hearts, hopefully bringing conviction leading to repentance of their sins against God and his Son Jesus the Messiah (see 1 Corinthians 14:3, 23-25). Those who had the gift of prophecy in the early church preached the word of God as it came to them by revelation or Old Testament prophets. Since then those who have this gift have preached the word of God as it was canonized in Scripture, revealing what the early prophets and apostles said. Agabus (see Acts 21:10) and the four daughters of Philip the evangelist, among many, were given the gift of prophecy. If you have been given the spiritual gift of prophecy, you are encouraged to begin using it now according to the proportion of your faith, or your knowledge of the word of God, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of serving (diakonia, which is the root of the word deacon). It is the spiritual ability to meet the physical needs of people within a given community of believers or unbelievers. One

of the first examples of the serving gifts in action was recorded in Acts 6:1-6 when the apostles selected seven men out of their group to minister to the poor Hellenistic Jewish widows who needed food. This in turn set the apostles free to minister out of their spiritual gifts. If you have been given the spiritual gift of serving, begin using it right now.

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of teaching (*didaskalos*). It is the spiritual ability to take truth from the word of God and explain it clearly so that the flock of God can understand it and apply the spiritual truths effectively to their daily lives. If you have been given the spiritual gift of teaching, begin teaching the Scriptures right now. It appears that one can have the spiritual gift of teaching without being a pastor/teacher, but one cannot be a pastor without being a teacher (see the definition of a pastor/teacher when we study Ephesians 4:11 in the next message). The natural gift of teaching can communicate any subject but yields only understanding of that subject. The spiritual gift of teaching communicates biblical truth and motivates men and women toward a life of godly obedience to that truth. Apollos and Paul had the spiritual gift of teaching (see Acts 18:24-28, 2 Tim. 1:11).

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of encouragement (*parakaleo*). It is the spiritual ability to come alongside a person who may be hurting spiritually or emotionally and offer them a word of comfort concerning the past and a word of encouragement, admonishment ("truthing" in love), and challenge so that they will be able to walk in the steps of the Spirit in the future. If you have the spiritual gift of encouragement, begin to use it right away. A man named Joseph was renamed Barnabas (Son of Encouragement) by the apostles because of his ministry to the early church in Jerusalem (see Acts 4:36-37).

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of giving (*metadidomi*). It is the spiritual ability to earn and then give financially or materially to the needs of others within the body of Christ or the community in which you live. Those who have this gift express it in simplicity to the glory of God without drawing attention to themselves. If you have the spiritual gift of giving, begin now with a full and generous heart. Barnabas again was a great example in the early church: He sold a field he had and gave the money to the apostles to distribute to the needs of the saints in Jerusalem (Acts 4:36-37).

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of leadership (*proistemi*, to rule). It is the spiritual ability to stand before a group of people and lead them, for example into a deeper walk with the Lord Jesus, in a mission project, in the building of a new community of Christians, in an elders' meeting, etc. If you have the spiritual gift of leadership begin leading with diligence. Don't just stand up and wing it. Jesus was our best example of a servant leader (see Mark 10:45).

The Spirit gives some the spiritual gift of mercy (*eleos*). It is the spiritual ability to manifest pity and to give aid to those who are helpless. It is the ability to express compassionate loving action, to lift up the one who is downtrodden and to do it joyfully. Tabitha "...was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity, which she continually did" (see Acts 9:36f).

Last week we had a delightful married couple and their adult daughter visit us at the first service and then attend our couples' class. They were from Reno, and are now looking for residence in the Palo Alto area. The husband is facing a liver transplant and needs to be near Stanford hospital. The wife and daughter need to find a home and jobs in this area in preparation for the future operation. We introduced them to the couples in our class. We then had them share a few of their immediate needs. At the end of the class, I saw an amazing sight: Many of our couples went right up to our visitors, and some wanted to share information on housing and jobs, while others said they would be praying for them. Several others offered to take them to lunch. One couple opened their home and invited them to stay the night in order to make their appointment at Stanford. I saw one body at work with a variety of spiritual gifts to meet the needs of this family. It was wonderful!

Our spiritual brothers and sisters, the body of Jesus Christ, benefit greatly when we are willing to give our bodies and minds to our living Lord Jesus to be used for his intended purpose on this earth. He wants us to use our new minds to give sober judgment to who we are in his sight and in his spiritual kingdom. Part of that sober judgment has to do with understanding the wonderful subject of spiritual gifts and the part they play within the body of Christ and the world around us. The key to an effective ministry is to understand the diversity of spiritual gifts within the unity of the body of Christ.

We have begun to answer some of seven questions we asked in our first message: (1) Where are the spiritual gifts listed in the word of God? Romans 12:6-8. In our next message we will find some listed in Ephesians 4:11 and in the following messages we will find some in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28. (2) What are their biblical definitions? We began defining the seven gifts found in Romans 12. (3) How can I discover my spiritual gift(s)? Ask the Lord to open the doors of service for you right now so that your gifts can be confirmed by your brothers and sisters as they serve alongside you.

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Romans 12:1-8
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