

“Homework Required?”

God’s House Calls

Scripture: Ephesians 4:7-16, 25, 29
February 24, 2008

One of my greatest joys is watching our grandkids opening gifts at Christmas time or on their birthdays. Not so much the older ones because they have become sophisticated and have learned it’s not cool to show joy. It’s the younger ones. The sheer anticipation of what the gifts are. We have one grandkid that actually shakes while she’s waiting to open her gifts.

What we’re going to talk about today is that when God was racking His brain to try to figure out:

How do I get them to understand that they were made to serve?

The word that came up was “Gift.” Everyone in this room, just like our grandkids, has had the experience of opening a gift that took our breath away. So this morning we’re going to look at what spiritual gifts are.

There were two camels standing around, a mama camel and a baby camel.

The baby camel asked his mother, “Mom, why do I have these huge three-toed feet?” His mother replied, “Well, son, God gave you big toes to help you stay on top of the soft sand when we trek across the desert.”

A few minutes later the baby camel asked, “Mom, why do I have these long eyelashes?” His mother replied, “Well, son, God gave you your long eyelashes to help keep the sand out of your eyes on our trips through the desert.”

A few minutes later the baby camel asked, “Mom, why do I have these great big humps on my back?” His mother replied, “Well, son, God gave you your humps to store water for our long treks across the desert, so you can go without drinking for long periods of time.”

A few minutes later the baby camel asked, “Mom, why don’t I have wings so I could just fly over the desert?” His mother, who was getting a little impatient with her son, replied, “Well, son, God didn’t give you wings because he did not think it was a good idea for camels to fly.”

The story shows that God provided the camel with just the right special gifts to make him a camel, no more, no less.

And so it is with us. God has given those of us who are Christ-followers a “special wiring” ... a “special gift” that we are to live out of. That we are to be who it is that God has called us to be with the tools He has provided us with. So, figuring out what our Spiritual Gifts are is a very important part of what it means to follow God.

Before we get into this I’d just like to explain Ephesians 4:8-10 first. I think this will make it easier, for our modern day minds, to explain where these gifts come from.

”⁸That is why the Scriptures say,

***“When he ascended to the heights,
he led a crowd of captives
and gave gifts to his people.”***

⁹Notice that it says “he ascended.” This means that Christ first came down to the lowly world in which we live. ¹⁰The same one who came down is the one who ascended higher than all the heavens, so that his rule might fill the entire universe.”
(Eph 4:8-10 NLT)

In Biblical times, when two nations fought and one nation was defeated, two things took place. The conquering nation would take the key people, the king, the rulers, the officers of the defeated nation and take them back to their country as captives to prove to their people that they were victorious. But they also brought with them, all the treasures of the defeated nation and they shared it with the people as gifts in appreciation for their support in the war. Paul is using this to compare the spoils of war to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus descended to the earth he conquered death at the Resurrection. By doing this he released men and women from the bondage of sin. When He ascended, He empowered the Holy Spirit to give gifts, spiritual gifts, to us for building up his church.

When we become Christians, not only are we justified by faith, not only are we baptized into the body of Christ, but we receive special gifts so that each one of us may function in whatever part God has chosen us to be in the unity of the body of Christ, the church. And it's not just special people who these gifts are given to:

⁷But to each one of us ... (Eph 4:7a NIV)

No one is excluded. Every believer, every Christian is given a Spiritual Gift. There's not a single one of us here today who does not have a Spiritual Gift. People sometimes shake their heads and say:

I must be the only one who doesn't have one.

but they do have a Spiritual Gift.

And to every Christian

“... grace has been given ...” (Eph 4:7a NIV)

The word "grace" is used in two senses in the New Testament. The primary meaning of grace in the New Testament is God's unconditional love towards fallen mankind in which He gave us His Son through whose life and death we have obtained, through Him, salvation that is full and complete.

But the word "grace" is also used in the New Testament, and especially by the apostle Paul, to refer to the power of God made available to us all through the Holy Spirit so that we can fulfill God's purpose in our lives. Not talking about saving grace, but grace for ministry. To each one of us, with no exception, we are given a gift – a special endowment for service – a God-given ability to serve.

Paul also says: No one has them all.

There is always a group of people who seem to get together and say:

This is amazing. We've been listening, and we have every one of them.

Paul has answered that question for us. "No, you don't." Every believer, every Christian is given grace

"... according to the measure of Christ's gift " (Eph 4:7b NASB)

So it doesn't matter to try and figure out why you have the Gift you do. Don't waste your time. God decides. You can't take a receipt back to God and ask for a different one because you don't like yours. You have a Gift. Everyone has one. You are gifted. You have a Gift, but you don't have them all, and part of not having them all means that we need each other to be the Church.

Paul makes it very clear that we are each responsible for using and developing our Gift. We have some homework, and it is required. Spiritual Gifts are not "extra credit." They are not frosting on the cake or a cool idea if you have time.

In Matthew 25, Jesus teaches the Parable of the Talents. He says that at the end of your life, God is going to ask you a question:

What did you do with the gifts that I gave you?

That passage tells us that when we can say:

We multiplied and used what You gave us,

We will hear these words from God:

"Well done good and faithful servant." (Matthew 25: 21 & 23 NIV)

So what are these gifts?

"¹¹ He is the one who gave these gifts to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists," (Eph 4:11 NLT)

These people are tasked with heavy construction -- building up the church.

- There were the apostles who were individuals sent with Jesus' personal authority to establish his church. In our day, these are missionaries.
- People who have the gift of prophecy ... to receive and communicate an immediate message of God to His people through a divinely-anointed utterance.
- Evangelists who bring or announce the good news of the Bible to non-believers.

In your bulletin is a blue sheet that has a list of spiritual gifts. I've arranged some of them those gifts under three broad categories. These are Gifts of the Heart, Gifts of Proclamation and Gifts of Action. Hopefully in the future we'll have a chance to look at them individually but for now just take a look at them when you get home. Try and identify which ones you think you have or someone you know may have.

But for today I just want to take a look at the fourth group;

"... and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹²to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up, ..." (Eph 4:11b-12a NIV)

It is through the proclamation of the word, through the feeding of the flock, through the teaching of the Word, through pastoral ministry, that the lay members, God's people, grow up into Christ and become mature Christians.

In other words, we're all in this together. The members of the church are to do the work of ministry *together with the pastors and teachers* -- not just the pastors and teachers alone. The body of Christ does not have two classes of members — clergy and laity — or two sets of expectations. Everyone has the same task of building up the body. The pastors and teachers help train and equip the members of the church to get on with their ministry. And this requires some homework. Homework that is required, not only by the pastors and teachers, but also by God's people.

To expect the pastors and teachers to act as "hired guns" to do the church's ministry is backwards. There are no spectators in the Christian church. The Christian religion is not a football game where there are a handful of men battling each other trying to win a game while there are thousands of people watching them and cheering them. That is not Christianity. Christianity is a religion in which every member has a vital part to play within the framework of the body.

"Between 1795 and 1820 the Methodists became the largest group of Christians in America. They did it with lay preachers, going everywhere sharing their faith, forming discipline small groups and gathering those small groups into churches. Church history makes it very clear that when the church has grown—I mean, really grown—it has grown because **EVERYBODY FOUND THEIR GIFT AND UTILIZED THAT GIFT** for the glory of God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!!! " [From the sermon: *Let the Church "Move Up"* by Dr. Neal Gray - Senior Pastor, Baltimore Parkville Church of the Nazarene, Baltimore, MD]

We learn that as the Body of Christ, we're supposed to equip everybody to figure out their gifts and then release them to serve. There's a pastor named Greg Ogden who's written a book about this topic. He describes his first church as a church that was small enough that the expectation was that as the Pastor, he would do everything. In addition to preaching and leading, he was expected to visit the Sunday Schools, do the marrying and burying and do all the hospital visitations.

It didn't take him too long to figure out that he was either going to die, have a nervous breakdown, or be a very ineffective pastor. So he began to search Scripture and found that he was guilty of what Moses had been guilty of. Moses was trying to be everything to all people.

¹⁷Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone... ²¹But select capable men from all the people..." (EX 18:17-18, 21 NIV)

He began to identify people who had spiritual gifts for things he wasn't good at. He said,

"Easily, right away, I realized I am terrible at hospital visitations. When I get to visit someone in the hospital, I'm sick to my stomach, weak in my knees, and when I get to leave, they feel worse than when I got here. This can't be good for them."

So he began to identify a handful of people who had the Spiritual Gift of Healing. People who had the gifts he lacked. He sat with them and taught them Scripture. They talked about what their plan would be, and he released them to be the Hospital Visitation Team.

He said that at one point, after that team got going, there was a man in the church who had been going to the church for probably “one hundred and fifty years and donated lots and lots of money and had tentacles of control all throughout the church.”

He knew that if he didn't visit when the man went into the hospital, there would trouble. But he also knew that the Bible had told him that he should release that work to people who were gifted at it. So he sat back, and for a week the Hospital Visitation Team visited that man.

Sure enough, when the man got home, Greg was the first person he called. He was furious! Greg had not come to the hospital to visit him! He went back to his Hospital Visitation Team. They had kept a log as they did with all of their visits. Somehow, they intuitively knew that when this particular man went into the hospital they would have to be extra careful. He looked in amazement over their logbook. Every day for seven days, six people from that team had gone to visit the man each day. Then Greg writes this:

“Forty-two times the presence of Christ stood by the sick man's bed, and he sent the Spirit of Christ away. He deemed Him as not important enough, because it didn't show up in the person he thought it ought to, the pastor.”

What the sick man didn't realize, but the pastor did, is that the presence of Christ, Scripture says, is in each of us.”

Paul makes it clear that every believer is given a gift of the Holy Spirit, or more than one gift, to fulfill a purpose in the body. So that the church

“ ... grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (Eph 4:16b NIV)

There are many Christians today who are paralyzed because they are not fulfilling what God has called them to do. No Christian should be a spectator. Every believer should do his part, his share.

When one does not do his share, the whole body suffers. Failure is the likely outcome when those who God has chosen to equip the church neglect their duties or when those who have been trained want to be served rather than serve. God did not give us these gifts so we can sit idly by while others serve the body.

Remember the camel story. The baby camel's mother explained to him all the special gifts he had received and why he received them. Then the baby camel said:

“That's great, Mom. We have huge feet to stop us from sinking, long eyelashes to keep sand out of our eyes, and humps to store water. But...Mom?”

“Yes, son?”

“Why are we in the zoo?”

Too many of us are like camels in a zoo. We have everything we need to live the way God intended, yet sometimes we play it safe and fail to put ourselves in a position to use our God-given gifts and talents in keeping with His purposes. Living in a zoo isn't all bad, but that's not where camels were created to live.

Some of you out there might be thinking; how can just little ole me make a difference? You might be thinking

- I'm only one person
- I don't have the skills
- I'm too old or too young
- I'm not smart enough
- I don't have the time, I'm too busy
- I'm burnt out already
- This stuff is just for church

Ken Blanchard, who wrote the *"Three Minute Manager"* and Barbara Glanz, a corporate consultant and speaker, have written a story about a guy named Johnny, a true story. Johnny was in a meeting that Barbara spoke at one time with 3,000 other front-line workers for a supermarket chain, like truck drivers, cashiers, baggers and stockers.

She was talking about how they could make a difference. She talked about how every interaction they would have with another person is the chance to create a memory, a chance to bless somebody's life, a chance to speak a word of healing. She told some stories about how this could happen. Then she went home. This is what Barbara writes:

About a month later I got a call from a front line customer contact person, a 19-year-old bagger named Johnny. The caller, proudly informed me that he had Downs Syndrome, a condition that causes delays in the way a child develops, and often causes mild to severe mental retardation. Johnny told me his story:

Barbara, I liked what you talked about but I didn't think I could do anything special for our customers; after all, I'm just a bagger.

Then he had an idea. He decided every night when he came home from work he would find a really good thought for the day—for the next day. If he couldn't find one someplace, he would make one up. Then every night his dad would help him enter the saying on a computer six times a page and then Johnny would sit there and print off 50 pages. Then he would take a pair of scissors and cut off 300 copies and he would sign his name to every one of them.

Then he would put the stack of them next to him while he worked the next day and every time he finished bagging someone's groceries, he would put his saying on top of the last bag. Then he would stop and he would look the person in the eye and say:

I put a great saying in your bag. I hope it helps you have a good day.
Thanks for coming in.

That was Johnny the Bagger.

A month later Barbara got a call from the store manager who said:

Barbara, you won't believe what's happened here. I was making my rounds. When I got to the cashier lines, the line at Johnny's checkout was three times longer than anybody else's. It went all the way down the frozen foods aisle.

So he got on the loud speaker to get more checkout lines open, but they couldn't get any of the customers to move out of Johnny's line. They all said:

That's okay, we'll wait, we don't care. We want to be in Johnny's line.

One woman came up to him, grabbed his hand and said:

I used to shop in your store once a week, now I come in every time I go by because I want to get Johnny's thought for the day.

Do you know who the most important person in that store is? It's Johnny the Bagger. He's not at the top of the Org Chart. He is for sure not making the most money. But he's the most important person in that store. A 19 year old bagger, with Down's Syndrome, named Johnny.

A few months later the manager called Barbara back. He said:

Barbara, you're not going to believe this, Johnny is transforming our store. He is changing the culture in our store. When the Floral Department has a broken flower or an unused corsage, they used to just throw it away. They don't throw it away anymore. Now they go out into the aisles and they find an elderly woman or a little girl and they pin it on them. The guys who make our shopping carts are working on carts where the wheels actually work. The whole culture of the store is being changed.

And this picture is a picture of the kind of thing Jesus does through people with the spiritual gifts He has given them. And if it can happen in a grocery store, it can happen anywhere. It can happen here!

By the way, do you know who the most important person in this church is? It's you. It's you when you say:

Alright God I'm wide open. Help me use the gifts You've given me.

Whatever your position is, whatever your job is, or whether you volunteer, or whether you're at home, whether you paid or not, anybody in this room can be a Johnny the bagger. What he did was not slick or complicated or calculated. It didn't get written down on a white board someplace or planned in a strategic planning meeting. He was just a bagger, but he was expressing his heart by a gift God had given him. And when people do that with love, we can make the Kingdom of God become part of our lives and others.

You and I can do that, whatever your title is, wherever you work, wherever you live, that can happen. This can be a community of people like Johnny the bagger. You can let people know that they matter to God; that God made them, and God loves them, that their lives matter. Through the gifts God has given you, you can help people to come and know Him.

The bottom line is when a church is involved in Spiritual Gifts, the vision of what a church can be is breathtaking: where people are unleashed according to what God designed them to do. Using your Spiritual Gift will connect you to what a person can be—who you are supposed to be.

There are many things that can grow you up and connect you to God: your personal devotions, going to church, walking in nature, reading a book, being part of a Home Group, a conversation with a friend. But I'm going to tell you ... few things in life have the capacity to fully grow you into the person God intended you to be ... than figuring out what your Spiritual Gift is ... and living as though you were created with a purpose—experiencing significance and meaning connected to God—and the great adventure of it all.

And then, because Gifts involve the Grace and Power of God, it will be one of the most profound ways in which you will experience who God really is. He will be alive and wonderful in your life.