



## You Have a Gift! For Building the Community 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27 October 2, 2005

Those of you who are following my messages in your Bible Study groups, let me ask you: are you beginning to get a sense of what your spiritual gifts are? So am I. I've been studying the same book and scriptures that you have. I've completed the same spiritual gifts inventory that you have, so let me tell you what I've been learning about me. It seems that my primary gift of the spirit is...pastoring. (Not pestering, *pastoring*.) And then my secondary gift of the spirit seems to be...compassion. And then, as to what comes third, there was a cluster of things tied for third, like evangelism, encouragement, etc.

O.K., now that that's settled, now what? When you get an idea of what spiritual powers God has given you, what do you do then? No, don't tell me what we're supposed to do with these spiritual gifts, what do we really do? What we're supposed to do is to put them to work for God and humanity. But often what we really do is...*compare* our spiritual gifts with each other. "Well this is how I think I've been gifted, but what are your gifts? Ohhh..." And when we start comparing, we start feeling either inferior or superior to each other.

I know I have my moments of spiritual superiority. I meet with lots of minister groups all the time. In some meetings, in my darker moments, I've thought to myself, I'm not really impressed with this bunch. What am I doing here? I don't need these people, not a gifted person like me."

But I also have my moments of spiritual inferiority. Twice a month I go to Greenville to meet with a group of ministers for mutual support, actually for my personal sanity. I have known most of these ministers for nearly twenty years, some longer than that. We know each other very, very well, well enough to know that each one's spiritual gifts are. If I allowed myself, I could look around the room at them and start feeling pretty inferior. Hugh is so gifted with courage. Greg is gifted with administration. Bob is gifted with spontaneity. Jimmy is gifted with wisdom. Before them it would be easy for me to descend into the depths, wishing I could be like them, wishing I could have their gifts. But if I ever did that, they would give me a kick in the backside and set me straight, and remind me that I am gifted too.

Have you ever fallen into that, into one of those two spiritual traps? Haven't you ever compared your spiritual powers to others and come away smug and superior? Haven't ever been in the presence of people you felt were spiritual giants and you felt like a mere ankle-biter?

If so, then you know that this was exactly the opposite of God's intention for gifts of the Spirit. God does not grant them to divide us into competitors and rivals who feel alternately inadequate or superior. God gives spiritual powers to unite us in community and to build up the church. How potent are these powers and gifts from God. With them we can destroy what community we have with divisive jealousy and envy. Or, with them we can build up a community in which every single person takes his or her gift and employs it for the good of all. What a difference. What a power.

If you look back over part of Paul's letter to Corinth that we just read, you can see those twin problems of spiritual inferiority and spiritual superiority in that church. In verses 14 – 20, Paul deals with people suffering from inferiority because they feel their spiritual gift looks puny compared to others. Paul gives to them a comical picture of a human body whose parts can talk to each other, sort of like those commercials for pain medicine or cold medicine with the runny nose talking to the headachy brain that's talking to the watery eyes. In Paul's image of a body, some of the body parts are feeling inferior to other parts. The foot feels inferior to the hand, and says, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body..." And the ear feels inferior to the eye, and says, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body..." And after Paul's readers stop laughing, Paul drives the point home and writes,

But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. (1 Cor. 12:18-20)

Point well taken. There is absolutely no call to compare gifts of the spirit and make yourself feel inferior. After all, we don't get to go to the gifts buffet and pick up what gifts we want. *God* distributes them as God wants according to the mystery of God's will. And we certainly cannot compare our gifts to the gifts of others. No part of a human body can claim inferiority or superiority. And neither can we, the parts of the body of Christ.

If you look further, at verses 21-26, you can overhear Paul dealing with the Corinthians who were feeling rather smug and superior about how gifted they were. In fact, if you read the whole letter, you realize that Paul had a lot of problems with this superior group. This was indeed a very gifted congregation. Some of the members were gifted with great spiritual powers of prophecy and knowledge and speech. But they let those powers get away with them. So Paul was constantly having to cut them down a notch, always warning them not to think of themselves too highly, always calling them to humility. For example in verse 21:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you,"  
Nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."  
On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. (vv. 21-22)

What a rude awakening for those over-proud Corinthians: the mere idea that the very ones they looked down their noses at might actually be the most indispensable members of their fellowship!

If you enjoyed J. R. R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings like I did, you will remember the Fellowship of the Ring, that motley crew of men and hobbits and a dwarf and an elf. Tolkien was a devout Christian, and as he spun that marvelous story, he made a point of how it was the seemingly weakest members of the fellowship, the little hobbits, who were the most indispensable members of that team to destroy the evil ring of power. That is a thoroughly Christian theme: the weakest turn out to be the most indispensable.

I started all this by asking: when you get a sense of what your spiritual gift is, such as giving, or prophecy, or helping, or wisdom, then what? What do you do with it? Let me return to the question with this answer. The last thing you should ever do is start comparing each other's gifts. On the contrary, the first thing you should do is start HONORING each other's gifts.

They are all just as valuable. There will be moments when the humblest gift will be just the thing to do our mission. We need every single spiritual gift God places among us, we dare not ignore or waste any of them. And, we need every single bearer of those gifts, every single person here. You may not understand now why you are here, nor what God wants you to do here. But in time, some day, there will be a moment when it will be you and your spiritual gift that is needed the most in this fellowship. And because God has ordered things this way, we give proper honor to every one among us. In Lord of the Rings, little Frodo the hobbit was the bearer of the Ring of power. In this fellowship right here, each one of you is a bearer of a gift of the Spirit.

So, the last thing to do is to start comparing gifts. And the first thing is to start honoring the gifts and the gift-bearer. And then what? Then it is time to put your gift to work: in this fellowship, beyond this fellowship, wherever God wants you to employ that gift for the sake of God and humanity.

So then, work the gift. As you do, you will get an eerie feeling that it is not you that is doing the work. And that is true. The gifts we employ really work because God works them. Paul wrote, "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:13) It is the energizing grace of God, that cannot be earned, that cannot even be selected, but can only be received as a gift of love by God's divine choice. It is a gift that has wonder-working power, just like the old hymn says.

And when you put your gift to work, it will have power to build something this world needs so desperately: community. In America we are so well off, we have a little bit of everything. In America, we also have a lot of loneliness. If there is anything that well-to-do, smug North Americans lack right now, it is community, somewhere to belong, somewhere you are needed and somewhere you find the people you need. But

when you put your gift to work, for the sake of God, for the sake of others, you will be part of a loving and caring community in which everyone uses his/her gift to serve each other. Nothing shows the love and salvation of God as much as a child of God who uses his or her gift for others.

Speaking of community, today we celebrate communion. At this table, we belong. At this table, we come into the Presence of the Christ who has made a place for each of us to be with Him always. At this table, we remember how Jesus used his spiritual gifts to create community among his disciples, a community that has grown from generation to generation until it includes us today.

So today, all of you who have been following Christ on his Way, take the bread and the cup, they are symbols of God's manifold grace and spiritual gifts. Today, take the bread and the cup, and encounter the presence of Christ. Through Christ you have received wonderful gifts of the Spirit. In Christ you have no desire to compare one to another. By Christ you have the power to put the gifts to work, for God, and for the Kingdom. Amen.

- Douglas E. Murray