

God's Gifts

Romans 12:6-8

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Most of us are fans of receiving gifts. In the United States, it is common for us to give people gifts for Christmas and for their birthday. Not every gift, however, is something we're excited to receive. Most people aren't excited to open a box containing underwear in front of their friends! Still, we are always grateful to receive gifts, as they are a way for others to show us we matter to them and are valuable to them.

That is a good concept to keep in mind as we look at our passage today, where Paul speaks of the gifts God gives to individual believers. Unlike a box of underwear, every one of God's gifts is desirable. But, like a box of underwear, they are also immensely practical.

As we look at Paul's list of gifts, I think we'll be challenged to see God's purpose and plan for us, for the church, and ultimately for His glory.

Body Parts

Look at what Paul says regarding spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6-8,

⁶ 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. ⁷ If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. ⁸ 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. (Romans 12:6-8, NLT)

Paul points us to the fact that God has given each believer gifts—abilities to do certain things well. To properly understand what Paul is saying in these verses, however, we need to remember the context of what he said in our passage last week.

Paul described the Church as like a body—with different parts playing different roles, and each part being essential to the proper functioning of the body as a whole. He was reminding us that we need each other. The body needs us, and we need the body. Our verses today are an application of that concept.

Right away, this should point us to the importance of being a member of a local church. Paul says that every Christian has gifts which they are to use for the benefit of the church as a whole. While it may be technically possible to use some of these gifts without being part of a local church body, it is exceedingly difficult for us to benefit from the gifts of others if we are not part of a local church body. God intends for us to work together, not to “go it alone.”

In the same vein, we should be reminded that while remote church (via the internet, radio, TV, or other means) is a great tool for outreach or enrichment, it is not a replacement for being together with other believers. We are designed to function together—which can only happen when we are actually together! The church is not something you attend, it is something you are part of—when you are absent, part of the church is missing!

Finding Your Gifts

In these verses, Paul lists 7 different gifts that God has given to believers by which to serve the church. This is not the only place Paul speaks about spiritual gifts, however. He also does it in 1 Corinthians 12 and references spiritual gifts in Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 4. Depending on how you count, you may arrive at 15 or more spiritual gifts mentioned in scripture.

Some people have concluded that these are the only gifts God has given to the church, so every believer must neatly fit into one or more of these categories. I don't believe Paul was intending to give an exhaustive list of spiritual gifts, otherwise he would have included the same gifts in each list. Rather, I think Paul was trying to list some examples of ways in which God gifts believers, with his ultimate focus on telling believers that they needed to use the unique gifts God gave them!

What we do know is that God has given every believer some gift or ability to use within the body of Christ. But many people ask, how do I know what my gift is?

There are different ways to approach this. One is to take a spiritual gifts inventory. There are many different flavors of inventories out there, but they all function the same. The idea is that if you answer a series of questions, the inventory will identify your most likely gifts. Dad is fond of telling the story of a person who filled out one of these inventories and discovered they had the gift of martyrdom! I have heard people who filled one out and discovered they had the gift of celibacy! While there is some value in such inventories, I would not look to an inventory as the final say on the matter.

Instead, I would encourage a more introspective approach. Ask yourself what things you have done in the church that you have found really rewarding or bring you joy to do? There's a good chance that doing things that correspond to your gift will energize you and fill your tank. If you haven't found something yet, try several different things!

Ask some Christian friends what they think your gift might be. Often, other people will see those gifts in you much more clearly than you see in yourself. There's a good chance your gift is something you don't think is a big deal—because God has gifted you in it! You may assume everyone thinks or serves like you, so you don't see your own gifting. Others who know you will often have a better perspective that can help.

Look at the ways in which you have served the Lord and ask, in what ways has God used me effectively? When you see God working and accomplishing things through your efforts, that may indicate you are gifted in that area.

The temptation sometimes is to conclude that if you have a gift for something that is public or flashy, that somehow your gifts are more important or more valuable than those whose gifts are more behind the scenes. But notice what Paul said before,
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. (Romans 12:3b, NLT)

In other words, we need to recognize the value of every person in the body of Christ. God has not only gifted *you* to serve, but He has gifted every believer! And each believer is gifted uniquely. These things are not a reason for us to seek praise, because they are gifts from God! Everything we do is ultimately for His glory and not for our own.

Specific Gifts

With that groundwork laid, we can begin to unpack the gifts Paul mentions in these verses and look at what their application looks like in the church today.

First is prophecy. Often, when we think of prophecy, we think of someone predicting the future. Certainly, that is one way God utilizes prophecy. Some today claim to be prophets by predicting future events. But God said that a prophet whose predictions do not come true are not from Him (Deuteronomy 18:21-22). The so-called prophets who keep making predictions and then revising them when they turn out to be wrong are not prophets of God at all, they are pretenders trading on God's name.

But prophecy can also take the form of speaking boldly on God's behalf. Paul and the other apostles were prophets in this sense, and in the early church it seems that there were people with this kind of prophetic gift. Some debate whether people still have this gift today. We certainly don't have it in the same sense that Paul or Peter did, but I do think God sometimes gives important spiritual insights to people today. Paul says the person with this gift should exercise it "with as much faith as God has given you." The word used here is the root for analogy. In other words, a genuine prophet will always speak in a way consistent with what scripture has said previously. Paul was clear on this in Galatians as well,

⁸ Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you. ⁹ I say again what we have said before: If anyone preaches any other Good News than the one you welcomed, let that person be cursed. (Galatians 1:8-9, NLT)

If the Mormons had been familiar with this verse, they might have correctly identified Joseph Smith as a false prophet. Any person claiming to be a prophet and speaking on God's behalf should do so with great caution, ensuring they are speaking consistently with what God has said before. And a "prophet" who contradicts God's Word is no prophet at all.

The **second gift is serving others.** This seems relatively straightforward, and it seems like something every believer should do. And it is! But some people have a unique

ability to anticipate and recognize the needs of others, and the compassion needed to meet those needs.

This may be reading to someone who needs encouragement, bringing food to someone recuperating from hospitalization, running errands, giving people a ride, or helping with handyman kind of work. You may not think it's a big deal but the person on the receiving end sees it as a very big deal.

Third is teaching. Teaching is the ability to explain things to others in a way that they can understand and apply. Not everyone who has a lot of knowledge is necessarily good at teaching (and not everyone who thinks they are a good teacher actually is). The real question is are people learning and growing?

I suspect this is one of the more common spiritual gifts. You may not feel like you can explain difficult concepts to other adults but may feel confident in explaining the essentials of the Christian faith to others. It is important for us to train up the next generation of Christians by teaching them the lessons we've learned. This is why Sunday School teachers, AWANA leaders, youth leaders, and even nursery workers are so important. The church should have an army of people who are teaching others, whether that is formally, in a class or ministry, or informally, by discipling a younger believer. Our church is *always* looking for people with this gift and a willingness to use it.

But note what Paul says—teachers are to teach well. This means teachers must prepare and ponder how best to communicate the truths they intend to teach. It means they must do their homework, to ensure that what they are teaching is accurate. And it means they must constantly be growing in their own faith, or they will have nothing left to teach others.

Fourth is encouraging. The gift of encouragement can take many forms, but all of them have one essential element—encouragers help others become all God has enabled them to be. An encourager sees potential in someone others might be tempted to write off. They not only see that potential but also do the work to come alongside that person and help them grow into it.

I think a good analogy is a parent teaching a child to ride a bike. Initially, the parent will have to teach the child the basics of how to pedal and help them along. The parent needs to be patient and help the child focus on their progress rather than their failures. The parent doesn't give up, and will often spend a lot of time running alongside their child, gently giving them support and helping them stay on track, until the time comes when they can let the child go on their own. And even then, that child still needs support for a while, as they encounter new situations. Eventually, the parent can let the child go off on their own.

This is what a person with the gift of encouragement does for other believers. They believe in them. They cheer for them. They support them and run alongside them. Sometimes they will offer advice or correction, but their goal is always to help another

reach their full potential in the Lord. People with this gift are essential to helping others grow in their faith and find ways to serve the Lord faithfully!

Fifth is giving. Like some of the other gifts on this list, this is something every believer is to do. But some people have a unique gift for giving. They find great joy in blessing others. They are good at recognizing and anticipating needs and providing for those needs. They are wonderfully selfless, people who are more concerned with the needs of others than their own desires. They use money as a tool to enrich the lives of others or the life of the church. You don't have to be wealthy to have this gift. Generous people can have a tremendous impact on others simply by helping them feel seen and valued.

Sixth is leadership. Leadership is an important element in any church. Unfortunately, we often have a very wrong-headed idea of what leadership looks like. We often base our ideas of Christian leadership on some of the poor examples we see in the secular world. A Christian leader is not someone who simply tells others what to do or who berates others into doing what they want. A Christian leader knows how to build teams, to facilitate cooperation, and to anticipate and solve problems.

One of the blessings of serving in a congregational church is that no one gets to make decisions and dictate them to others. Leadership in a congregational church (and I believe in all contexts) involves getting people moving and thinking in the same direction. It's less about power, and more about building consensus.

Christian leaders may build a team of people to meet a local need or go so far as to build an international organization that meets needs on a global scale. But Christian leaders share a specific trait—they are able to build teams and facilitate getting the best from everyone on that team.

Seventh is kindness. Kindness is something that should be evident in every believer (after all, it is part of the fruit of the Spirit!) But some people have a particular gift for being kind to others. They know how to speak to others in a way that makes people feel loved and cared for. There is a gentleness in their approach that makes it possible for them to say things no one else can. People with the gift of kindness are immensely valuable because they are gentle, graceful, and merciful, while also being able to speak the truth to people. People with this gift are often able to communicate difficult truths in a way that few others can.

I hope that as you go through this list, you see some evidence of some of these gifts in your own life. If you don't think you fit into one of these areas, don't despair! These are not the only ways that God gifts His people. But the examples Paul gives us here give us a sense of what spiritual gifts look like. Notice what each of these gifts have in common—they are designed to build up others and advance the cause of the Kingdom. These gifts are not exercised for our benefit (though there are always blessings to using the gifts God has given you), but for the benefit of the body of Christ! I believe Paul's summation would be simple—whatever God has enabled you to do well, use it to

benefit the Kingdom! If we keep that concept in mind, we'll view our gifts, and the gifts of others, in the right light.

Conclusions

The topic of spiritual gifts is something people like to debate endlessly. They argue about things like does God still give people the gift of prophecy, or speaking in tongues, or healing, or things of that nature. Sadly, these debates result in division, which completely misses the point! Spiritual gifts are not meant to be academic; they are practical. They should advance the Kingdom of God.

Some look at their spiritual gifts as a reason to feel superior to other believers, because their gifts are the most important. On the flip side are those who believe their contributions are irrelevant. This is why it is important for us to remember the context in which Paul places this discussion. He reminds us that each person is gifted by God for the purpose of building up the body of Christ. He reminds us that we should see the value of each person's contribution, and not to view ourselves more highly than we ought. It is only when we do these things that we can derive the benefit God intended for us from our spiritual gifts. With that said, I want to draw a few concluding applications for us.

First, our gifts are intended to be a blessing, not a burden. Sometimes people are hesitant to exercise their spiritual gifts because they are already very busy, and they don't want to add one more responsibility to their list of things to do. Can I remind you of something? When you use your gifts, there are rewards that nothing in this world can touch. When you get a chance to see God working in others through you, it provides a joy that nothing else can. There is a very real sense in which you were made for this! When you are obedient to the Lord, using the gifts He's given, you will find it more fulfilling than anything else in the world. Yes, there will be days that it is hard, but anything that is worth doing will be hard sometimes. When you do not exercise your gifts, not only does the church miss out on blessing, but you do as well!

Second, people can have the same gift and use it in different ways. Every person is unique, and this is by design! Be creative in thinking of ways to exercise your gifts, just keeping in mind the goal—to build up and honor the body of Christ! Each local church can and should look different. Don't feel that you have to copy what someone else does but think about how best to use the gifts God has given you.

There are no bad or useless gifts from God. He gives them to us so we will use them! There are myriad stories of the difference one person putting their gifts into practice can make. Imagine what happens when you have an entire church doing that! So let me encourage you to put your gifts into practice and turn back to praise the One who gave them to you. I promise, if you put His gifts to use, you won't be disappointed.

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