

## Getting it Right: Session Nine

### Giving Your Gift Away

1 Peter 4:9-11; Romans 12:1-8; Ephesians 4:7-13;  
1 Corinthians 12

As a kid I loved to read. Well, let me amend the statement to more truthfully say I loved to read mystery stories. One might take the first sentence to infer I was a voracious reader of important things like history, geography and my science book. No, I read those both grudgingly and sparingly, most often directly before a test, as the smattering of C's on my report card attest. I knew where the kid's fiction books were in both the school and public library and during the summer I raced to the mailbox to grab my copy of the prized Weekly Reader.

The Hardy Boys and I solved a lot of mysteries together during long, hot summers. "The Shore Road Mystery" was a good one dealing with car thefts along the Shore Road. Neither Frank, Joe nor I saw the need for police to handle the grand theft auto crimes. We could figure this out, wrap it up and then call Bayport's finest. Then it was off to "The Tower Treasure" where we looked for hidden loot in a deserted mansion to clear the name of a friend's father. Loot, who uses loot anymore?

After I exhausted the Hardy Boys books, I decided Nancy Drew needed my help. She worked alone, no brother-partner, so I jumped in with both feet. "The Secret of the Old Clock;" "The Haunted Showboat;" "The Mystery of the 99 Steps;" and "The Clue of the Whistling Bagpipes" ... now those were great literature. What great reads for a budding sleuth who began to think he could write his own mysteries. And I did think I could write mystery stories... so I did. My 4<sup>th</sup> Grade teacher was quite eccentric. She had us making paper machete birds (she was a birder), learning to crochet, and we could pick something else artsy to work on. That year was short on history, but I made several oddly shaped birds, crocheted two shawls and wrote at least a dozen mystery stories. My hippie teacher was kind, but her face gave it away. I was not making any progress as a writer, but it was 4<sup>th</sup> grade and really, was Shakespeare nailing it in grammar school in Stratford-upon-Avon?

So, the years went by and my writing gave way to sports and girlfriends, and my university years were spent studying criminology, so real crime left little time for fictionalized stories. A career shift saw me leaving law enforcement/criminal justice system and following a call to ministry and seminary. Shifting from forensic investigation to systematic theology was so intense personal writing was not an option, but I graduated, left seminary and began working for a church. I was living in New Orleans where day to day life is a mystery, so I decided to finally write the mystery novel that had been churning around in me since 4<sup>th</sup> Grade. I did. It was 150 pages, too short for an actual novel, but when the reviewers use words like “mercifully short,” I got the idea. Even friends who read it for review had a hard time framing their facial expressions with the words they were saying. It really was bad. So I gave up writing, or so I thought.

Within weeks I found myself creating studies for the church I was serving. Next church, same thing. I wrote volumes for the Sunday School there. And then came JCBC. Our unique structure and curriculum needs led to even more writing, which led to outside attention, which led to conversations about a book, that turned into a series of books. Suddenly I was a writer, a professional writer, with books in Borders (OK, they went under just months after beginning to carry my books, but I’m not taking responsibility for that. I prefer to think it was the economy). Now, I wasn’t the writer I fancied myself to be and there’s a world of difference between writing crime fiction read by millions and comparative religion studies and theological takes on the letter of James, read by, oh I don’t know, 100’s. So, no, I didn’t turn out to be the next Grisham. I guess I turned out to be the only me.

And this is where we begin our study of spiritual gifts. Each of us has a unique spiritual gift. Created in us and for us at birth, which becomes actualized when we begin a faith relationship with God through Jesus and are filled with the Holy Spirit.

I wanted to be one kind of writer, but I ended up being a different type. The difference? Possibly talent and aptitude but more than anything it’s spiritual need. But that’s my story, all of ours is different. So, let’s see what we can learn about spiritual gifts:

1. Every person has a unique spiritual gift. Paul writing to the Corinthian church says, “All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one, by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what and when.” So, we all have a gift and our

gift is a gift from God to be used for the Kingdom. An amazing number of Christian adults would not be able to cite their gift, while others would say they do not have one. Below is the most common list of New Testament gifts:

**Knowledge** (not teaching, this is a learner with extraordinary gifts)

**Prophecy** (not future-telling, this is proclamation or preaching)

**Encouragement** (presence, comfort, consolation, uplifting)

**Mercy** (empathy, sympathy, concern and ministry to those truly suffering and in need)

**Healing** (supernatural ability to be a conduit of healing to another person)

**Tongues** (supernatural ability to speak in an unknown language, a spirit language, to praise God. This can be done privately or in a group of believers. This is different from Pentecost, those were known languages)

**Interpretation/Tongues** (Ability to interpret the glossa/unknown language when spoken to an assembled group, as in a believer is speaking for God)

**Evangelist** (uniquely burdened to share the gospel by word and through living it out)

**Hospitality** (Ability to make people, especially new people/guests, feel welcome and at home when visiting a church setting or in someone's home. Best people to be greeters or first contact)

**Prayer** (This is a disputed gift as it is not found on many lists. It may be that some believers are naturally better at prayer than others or that the gift is actually intercessory prayer, which is an ability to effectively pray for other persons)

**Discernment** (appraise, judge persons or situations for spiritual truth or error)

**Pastor** (originally this gift was for the shepherd of a group, caring for the spiritual needs, but over time it took on more group leadership, then teaching and now proclamation or preaching. Think pastoral care for the original meaning as one doesn't have to be clergy to have or exercise this gift)

**Apostle** (ambassador for Christ, emissary to go ahead of the church, empowered to do miracles)

**Faith** (extraordinary spiritual vision and belief that great things can and will be accomplished)

**Leadership** (Ability to stand before a church or group and direct with care and attention and to motivate them toward a common goal)

**Administration** (from Greek shipmaster's navigating into harbor, or steering. The guiding/director of the body)

**Giving** (ability to give boldly and liberally without thought of return or credit)

2. Spiritual Gift Inventories are available to test for an individual's gift sets. I tested again last week and mine were shepherding, teaching and administration. Here's something to know: many inventories tinker with the names/titles of gifts, which is fine. There are only so many gifts listed in scripture that was written approximately 2000 years ago. Needs and opportunities have changed a great deal since Paul's day. Using a MacBook is a rather new skill set for the church, as is using an IMAG camera system. Writing, which I consider a spiritual gift, was not listed in any N.T. letter. I get it. They used berry juice for ink and dried papyrus for paper. I wrote my "not-so-acclaimed" novelette on an electric typewriter, my dissertation on one of the first word processors and my first book on an actual computer. My how times change. My how our options for impacting the Kingdom with our gifts change with every generation.
3. Some gifts are also spiritual duties that all believers should be doing regardless. What does this mean? Well, I score poorly on prayer. Yikes, did a pastor just say that? Yes, this one did. I am not naturally good at prayer. Sure, I can gin up a good one for public consumption, especially if I write it, but a true prayer gift is more about private, intimate and seriously intense time spent with God. My mind wanders, a lot, so I'm always spiritually G.P.S'ing myself back on task. But prayer is a must for every believer, so I keep at it every day despite not being great at it. Think of another gift that is basically mandatory for all of us? Giving would be one. Possibly mercy. Serving if we are able. Knowledge as we must be all studying

and growing in scripture. The moral here? Even though a spiritual discipline is not your strong suite and certainly not your primary spiritual gift, it still needs to be practiced with vigor and dedication. Sure, a truly gifted person will outshine us, but that's how the Kingdom goes around.

4. Spiritual gifts are more than talents. They don't call them *spiritual* gifts for nothing. Plenty of people are talented and it's possible that one's talent is indeed their spiritual gift, but it can't be a spiritual gift until the person becomes spiritual. It's basically sequential. Let's say you're a piano prodigy. You are playing Mozart like a pro at five and being sent scholarship queries in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. This would make you very, very talented, but would not, even could not, be your spiritual gift until you became a Christian. It takes the Holy Spirit to unlock the "spiritual" piece that transforms a talent, no matter how impressive it is, into a spiritual gift.
5. Spiritual gifts are always positive and build up the Kingdom, rather than negative and divisive. If someone is a negative force and everywhere they go the proverbial dominoes are falling in the wrong direction... their gifts are not genuinely spiritual. In fact, Paul told the Corinthian church that any negativity (or competition) related to spiritual gifts was an un-Godly pursuit. The end result of gift-practice would be the "more excellent way," which is love. 1 Corinthians 12 gives way to 1 Corinthians 13. Re-read it. It frames what our Christian existence is to be all about.
6. There is no hierarchy in gifts. No one gift is more important than another gift. It's true that some gifts get more time in the spotlight, like preaching, teaching and leadership, but they are not more important to the cause than behind-the-scenes service gifts. In fact, it takes all of the gifts to make the church and Kingdom work properly and effectively and without the less-noticeable gifts the preachers and teachers would not have the platforms they have.
7. To serve God's Kingdom is our calling and our spiritual gift is our primary method to do so. The stakes are high. 1 Peter 4 prefaces his list of gifts with the statement, "the end of all things is near." This was prefaced by how the world had influenced Christians who had dabbled in, and I quote Peter: "You've done what

pagans do, debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and idolatry.” Peter then says, “be clear minded, self-controlled so you can pray and love each other deeply: After all of this he speaks to spiritual gifts. Peter stresses self-control for the sake of a life based in prayer that allows for genuine love to be shared among the fellowship. Then he says spiritual gifts should be applied for the common and greater good. We must be first spiritual beings, then do spiritual things through the exercising of our gifts.

8. Maybe the word *gift* is dated. What if a better way to look at this is to ask, “What is God enabling you to do?” Or, “What is God empowering you to do?” Or, “What is God exciting you with?” Or, “What ministry element do you feel you need to be part of?” Or, “What do you see that makes you say, I can do that, I want to do that!”

We can make a difference. We are supposed to make a difference. In our own way, in our own time, through our own gift, vision or passion. It’s part of getting it right.

Amen & Amen.

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