

The Key to Spiritual Gifts: Use Them!

Romans 12:6-8

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After five weeks of messages related to the coronavirus and Easter, today we get back into the study we were in before all this started: Romans. Remember Romans? Our now two-year study has us in chapter 12. Here's a quick review since it's been awhile: Romans answers the question, *how can a sinner have a right standing before a holy God?*

We are sinners by nature and by choice and deserve God's wrath. God has provided a way for us to be declared righteous—justification—even though we are not righteous. How? The righteous one, Jesus, the Son of God, died in our place and for our sins bearing our guilt. Now God can and will apply Jesus' righteousness to us by faith, not by our attempts to be righteous. If we turn from our sin and trust in Jesus, God declares us righteous forever. We are forever united with Jesus, his death and our death, his resurrection a guarantee of our resurrection. His eternal life means eternal life for us too. So, there's no condemnation for us because nothing can separate us from God's sovereign love. After all, he chose to save us in eternity past by his sovereign grace. Then we get to chapter 12, "*Therefore...by the mercies of God,*" (Romans 12:1 ESV) and everything that flows through chapter 16 is the application of all that God has done for us. The gospel redefines our identity, our destiny, and our lives today.

Our text is 12:6-8 on spiritual gifts. I'll begin in verse 3,

"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness." (Romans 12:3-8)

The Apostle Paul illustrates the interconnectedness of Christians with the illustration of a body. That's a great illustration because we can all easily relate. We all have bodies and understand how varying body parts have to work together. When that doesn't happen, something's desperately wrong. Diseases like MS and rheumatoid arthritis are the body attacking itself. A healthy body is where all the body parts are working in harmony together, doing their part, for the good of the body.

This text tells us every Christian is a critically important body part which the Holy Spirit has endowed with certain giftings to serve and bless the whole.

"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them." (v. 6)

Let's assume for a moment that none of us have ever heard of spiritual gifts. That's probably true for some people. What is a spiritual gift? Here's a definition: "*A spiritual gift is*

any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church."¹
(Wayne Grudem)

Don't confuse these with natural gifts. The difference between a natural gift and a spiritual gift is one of empowerment and fruit. A natural gift can be humanly enabled and done by people on their own. Bill Gates can make a fortune and give generously to a foundation. Peter Drucker can lead and administrate. Knute Rockne can inspire a football team. What they cannot do with their natural abilities is produce spiritual fruit.

"Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." (Romans 8:8)

The difference between a natural gift and a spiritual gift is that spiritual gifts are empowered by the Holy Spirit and produce spiritual fruit that the natural gift never could. God's gifts are God's call. If you want to know where God wants you to serve, look at how he has gifted you. Sometimes this may flow with your natural personality or preferences, but sometimes it's the opposite direction.

That's my story. Have you heard of being so afraid your knees were literally shaking back and forth? I remember in high school being so afraid to stand and speak in front of people that my knees were literally shaking in my pants. If you would have said, "Steve, you're going to do this every weekend for the rest of your life," I would have fainted on the spot. Please God, anything but that. Yet here I am. Only by divine call and enablement, the old me would never have guessed it or wanted it.

But this is how God works. He uses the most unlikely people in the most unlikely ways to advance his kingdom. Why? Who gets the glory then? He does.

Another mistake people make is they view their spiritual gift like a superpower. These aren't infinity stones and you don't have spiritual Spidey senses. That's how the Corinthians thought about spiritual gifts. Read 1 Corinthians 12ff. The Corinthians were self-obsessed with spiritual gifts. *What gift do you have? What gift do I have? Is your gift more powerful than what I have?* They coveted the public gifts because it drew attention to them. Paul rebukes them for turning spiritual gifts into carnal self-advancement.

It is not the Gifts of the Spirit but the Fruit of the Spirit that Indicate Spiritual Maturity

God can choose to use whatever he wants to fulfill his purposes and when he uses humans, he's always choosing to use flawed and broken vessels. Gifts are not indicators of godliness, which is why we shouldn't be too enamored with them or those who have them. They are gifts after all. How do we know who is godly? The best preacher? Leader? Author? No. The fruits of the Spirit indicate who is truly led by the Spirit: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control*. These are what Christian maturity looks like.

Have you ever wondered how a preacher or evangelist could have a huge following and reach many, many people with the gospel only to discover he was incredibly immoral the whole time? Don't mistake gifts for godliness. God can and will use his gift in us in spite of us. I've preached many a sermon with self-regard or concern and God chose in his mercy to use it anyway. Perhaps this one will be another example.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 1016.

The Purpose of Spiritual Gifts is Blessing and Serving Others in the Church

- "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."
(1 Corinthians 12:7)
- "To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ."
(Ephesians 4:12)

1 Corinthians 13 reminds us that incredible spiritual giftedness without love means nothing. Even if I have oratory equal to the ability of angels or if I cast out demons or move mountains, if I don't have agape love as a quality in my character, I gain nothing. Love is the quintessential Christian quality. So, don't be too impressed by spiritual gifts you see in others; that gift was given to them by the Holy Spirit. Be impressed by love, joy, and peace and strive to make this part of your life as well.

Here is an incredible truth:

Every Christian has a Spiritual Gift or Several Spiritual Gifts

You may be thinking, I must have been at the end of the line and God ran out of gifts because I don't think I have one. Not only do you have one, you likely have several. When you think about it, it's incredibly exciting. God is actively empowering his people to fulfill his mission and giving us the enablements we need.

So Christian, hear this, you have at least one Spirit-granted, God-empowered gifting. God's gifts are God's call, which means he has a purpose for every one of us. This means every member of the church is critically important and the diversity of gifts tells us that no one person is too important. *Pastor Steve, then what should I do?*

"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them." (Romans 12:6, emphasis added)

The emphasis in Scripture is surprisingly not on how to discover your spiritual gift, but on the necessity of using your spiritual gift. Why would that be?

In days gone by, discovering your spiritual gift was a bigger deal in local churches. There were spiritual gift surveys and lots of emphasis on finding your spiritual gift. Yet, the Bible gives no guidelines on how to do so. It just urges us to use them.

I take from this that discovering your spiritual gift is a lot like many things in life—you figure it out as you go. Author Kevin DeYoung summarizes this with his book title, *Just Do Something!* As we do something, as we serve, as we try this and that, there will be some categories we are drawn to. Areas where our service seems effective. Other church members will notice and tell you, *that was great! Wow, you're really good at that!*

Do something. Get the wagon moving and let God steer it. As God blesses, take that as the yellow brick road. It likely will bless you in doing it, but don't take your personal enjoyment of it as a key indicator. I've had too many church members strangely enjoy things they are not good at. Spiritual gifts bless, equip, and sustain others.

Just give it a try. When some opportunity to serve is shared in the church, give it a go. As Senior Pastor, I'm giving everyone who is trying permission to fail spectacularly. As long as you're trying.

My sense of it is that it's like a pickup game of basketball. Ten guys choose sides and start playing. As the game goes, players gravitate toward their strengths. Those good at rebounding trend toward being around the basket. Those good at defense trend toward guarding the best player on the other team. Those good at shooting, which all ten are convinced they are, trend toward shooting. As you play, your gifts become evident.

As you serve, your gifts will become evident. If you wait to do anything until you know how God has gifted you, you will wait a long, long time.

Now I say this in love, but some of you I have pastored for two decades or more now and the body part I'd describe you as is the appendix. After all these medical advancements they still aren't sure the purpose of the appendix. Nothing but love here, but Mr. and Mrs. Appendix, after all these years, there is still no apparent purpose in the body that you are serving. Many people remove their appendix. We aren't going to remove you, but it would be a blessing to us and to you, if you actually started doing something. *Like what?*

"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness." (Romans 12:6-8)

One of the challenges is that there are five places in the New Testament describing spiritual gifts, and none of the lists are the same in number of gifts or specific gifts listed. To give you a sense of it:

<u>1 Cor. 12:8-11</u>	<u>1 Cor. 12:28</u>	<u>Rom. 12:6-8</u>	<u>Eph. 4:11</u>	<u>1 Peter 4:11</u>
Wisdom-word	Apostles	Prophecy	Apostles	Speaking
Knowledge-word	Prophets	Service	Prophets	Serving
Faith	Teachers	Teaching	Evangelists	
Healing gifts	Miracle-workers	Exhorting	Pastor-teachers	
Miracle working	Healing	Giving		
Prophecy	Helps	Leadership		
Distinguishing spirits	Administration	Mercy		
Speaking in tongues	Tongues			
Interpreting tongues				

There are 30 gifts listed here. Some of them overlap so it's not precise how many gifts there are. If you don't count them twice, there are somewhere around 20 unique gifts.

Since none of the lists are the same and these letters were written to different congregations, it seems fair to say they were not meant to be exhaustive, but rather examples of the gifts. It could be argued that they are categories that all the gifts fall into. Some of the gifts are functions; some are offices, like Apostle and prophet. 1 Peter 4:11 summarizes them nicely into two categories: "*Whoever **speaks**, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever **serves**, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies.*"

Speaking gifts and *serving gifts*. Not that speaking isn't serving or serving doesn't involve speech, but for a broad breakdown, it's helpful. Our study is Romans 12 so let's just walk through these seven gifts and then draw some conclusions.

"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith." (Romans 12:6)

Prophecy: this is easily the most debated gift in the list. I don't have time to dive into this but let me just say good people disagree here. Most would affirm this to be a gift of direct revelation from God spoken in words and applied to a particular setting. Ephesians 4 tells us the apostles and prophets are the foundation of the church. Is that Old Testament prophets? More likely it's speaking of New Testament prophets like Agabus in Acts 21 who is called a prophet. God spoke through them. It is debated whether this gift or office is still active today. Clearly, the office of apostle is not. I lean toward this as indeed direct revelation through a prophet for a time and place—a gift very rarely, if ever, seen after the first-century church, while leaving room for God to do what he wants when he wants.

The next three are fairly self-explanatory. **Service** in our serving. Teaching in our teaching. Exhorting in our exhorting. With each gift the encouragement is to steward the gift by using the gift! Service is gifting that clusters around acts of compassion, helps, and benevolence for the needs of others. In some ways, all the gifts are gifts of service, but those gifted in these ways are especially adept at meeting the practical needs of others.

I think of our member, Jan Carlson, who clearly has this gift. Jan just lost her husband Vern three weeks ago and our hearts are with her. For over 20 years, Jan has made copies of books and commentaries for me to study each week. I would estimate Jan has made over 60,000 individual page copies for me over the years. She loves it. It's a highlight for her. Would it be a highlight for me? No way. The Spirit wired Jan to serve the body by producing materials for the pastor to prepare his sermon. She has joy in doing it and misses it when she can't. That's the gift of service.

Teaching and Exhortation. Teaching is content speech that spiritually equips people. Exhortation is more the application of truth that blesses people. I think last Sunday, Pastor Dexter displayed his remarkable gift of exhortation. Teachers and exhorters are incredible blessings to the church. Good sermons have some of both.

"The one who contributes, in generosity." (v. 8) Did you know financial giving is a gift? Before you say, *I don't have that gift*, giving is like serving. We are all called to it and all who give receive the blessing of supporting God's work. By the way, church, your ongoing financial support through this quarantine has been amazing. I can't thank you enough. That said, there are some people God has particularly wired for generosity in financial support. This gift works best when they are also wired for making money so they can give money. But the gift of generosity can be found on all levels of the economic ladder, as Jesus' praise of the widow's mite proves.

"The one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness." (v. 8) Praise God for those gifted to lead in ministry. Where we would be without good leadership? Leaders, lead with zeal! The Greek word means *eagerness and diligence*. In a totally different category, acts of mercy, do so with cheerfulness. We get our word "hilarity" from the Greek word. It's translated *cheerfulness* here. Why is that important when doing acts of mercy? If the person in need sees a sour attitude in the one giving mercy, they think, *I'm another burden*. But a smile, a sense of joy while giving mercy communicates value and love, which is incredibly hope-giving to the discouraged.

God is not honored by begrudging service. I think often of Psalm 100:2, *"Serve the Lord with gladness!"* Do I always? No. Am I overflowing with zeal and cheerfulness in quarantine? It's challenging. But then life always is.

The main point is the first point. **Use your gifts!** Serving Jesus by serving his body is a tremendous privilege. Mr. and Mrs. Appendix are missing out. Why? *It is more blessed to give than to receive.* Who are the happiest people in our church? The Appendix family or Mr. Bicep, Mrs. Ear, or Miss Heart? You know.

One final word here because some of you may feel motivated but still unsure of a direction to serve. This might give you some indication of your gifting. Here we are in this extraordinary time of quarantine. What about the community life of our church are you missing the most? I can't wait to get back to _____. What you are missing might be your gifting.

What are you doing the most these days? Think in spiritual categories. Eating Cheetos is not a spiritual gift. What has emerged in you through all this? How are you serving others? For some it's words and speech. You are calling people. Praying with people. Writing notes of encouragement. Blogging. You are serving with words. Others, you haven't called and prayed with anyone, but you've organized meals down the whole block. You've mowed the old lady's lawn next door and came home with a smile on your face. In times of crisis, our giftings can shine through.

Imagine a community of Jesus-lovers empowered by God to bless each other with Spirit giftings in speech and service with an attitude of hilarity in doing so. Doesn't that sound like a great thing to be a part of? That, my friends, is a healthy local church.

That's the dream around here. Our motto, *It's all about Him*, unites us in purpose and energizes our service to one another and the community in ways that bring greater glory to God. Every gift is important, which means every person is important—including you.

"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them!" (v. 6)

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