

1 COR 12.4-7: LET'S USE OUR GIFTS

[Chelmsford 28 February 2009]

1. YOU ARE GIFTED

Yes, in the family of God each of his children is a gifted child! If you are a child of God, then you are special – and you have a special role to play in the purposes of God.

That is the clear teaching of the Apostle Paul. Listen again to what he has to say in 1 Cor 12.-4: **“There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving, but the same Lord is served. There are different abilities to perform service, but the same God gives ability to all for their particular service. The Spirit’s presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all”.**

In other words, all of us are gifted – all of us have ability – all of us are able to serve God. Don’t let anybody ever put you down. Everybody is gifted, irrespective of gender, age, social standing, or academic achievement.

Doesn’t that make you feel good?

Hopefully, however, it doesn’t make you swollen-headed. For ‘gifts’ are ‘gifts’.

You are not special because of anything you have done – you are special because of what God has done – he has gifted you – he has given you ability.

Interestingly the Corinthians appear to have spoken of ‘spiritual gifts’, but Paul refuses to use the term ‘spiritual gifts’ - he speaks of ‘grace gifts’ (charismata) – i.e. gifts are gifts of God’s undeserved favour!

2. GOD’S GIFTS ARE MANY AND VARIOUS

When it comes to giving gifts, God is incredibly creative. He gifts his children in amazingly diverse ways. Variety is the name of the game.

Alas, some Christians have wanted to limit the variety of God’s gifts.

They speak, for instance, of the nine gifts of the Spirit: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. And, of course, those are the gifts that Paul lists in vv8-10 of this chapter.

But then, just a few verses later, he draws up a further list of nine gifts of the Spirit, only five of which coincide with his previous list: there he speaks of apostles, teachers, helpers, leaders.

But, of course, we cannot just limit ourselves to his letters to Corinth.

In Romans 12 and Ephesians 4 there are two further lists of gifts of the Spirit.

And, if we go beyond Paul, we discover in 1 Peter 4 yet another list of gifts.

What’s more, none of these lists provide an exhaustive catalogue of spiritual gifts – they are but samples of the Spirit’s work. His gifts are many and various.

Peter makes this point clear when in 1 Peter 4.10 he uses an unusual word to describe these “varied” (REB: see GNB “different”; NRSV “manifold”). The adjective he uses (*poikilos*) is a very rich term: it was used of an embroidered cloth or of an oriental carpet: i.e. God gifts are like an elaborate tapestry. *“The rich diversity of spiritual gifts are the many threads of many colours which are interwoven to make the beauty of the whole”* (John Stott). The fact is that when it comes to giving gifts, our God is a God of rich and colourful diversity.

3. GOD’S GIFTS ENCOMPASS A WIDE-RANGE OF ABILITIES

Some Christians have tried to distinguish between gifts and talents – spiritual gifts, they say, are gifts bestowed on us miraculously by the Holy Spirit after conversion; whereas natural talents are abilities which are ours by birth and have nothing to do with the new creation. *“The spiritual gift is more than just a souped-up natural talent”* (Peter Wagner)

Certainly the gifts that Paul lists in 1 Cor 12.6-8 have a supernatural quality about them – who naturally would work miracles? However, as we look at some of the other lists of gifts of the Spirit, there is a mundane quality about them: for instance, the gifts of teaching and encouragement which Paul lists in Romans 12 are not gifts peculiar to Christians alone.

I believe that we cannot easily distinguish between spiritual gifts and natural talents. For God is not just the God of redemption, he is also the God of creation. Indeed, the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit was active in creation, and not just in the work of the new creation.

Bear in mind too that God’s purposes for us are eternal: the Scriptures teach us that prophets like Jeremiah and John the Baptist were set apart to be prophets from their mother’s womb (Jer 1.4; Lk 1.15, 76). Is it too much to believe that God equipped them right from the moment of their conception for their spiritual tasks? To quote John Stott again: *“This fundamental truth that God has planned the end from the beginning should warn us against too facile a discontinuity between nature and grace, between pre-conversion and post-conversion life”*. Or as Howard Snyder once put it: *“A spiritual gift is often a God-given ability which has caught fire”*

Listen again to what Paul has to say in 1 Cor 12.4-6: **“There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them. There are different ways of serving, but the same Lord is served. There are different abilities to perform service, but the same God gives ability to all for their particular service”**. God’s gifts encompass a wide range of abilities.

4. SO LET’S USE OUR GIFTS BY FINDING OUR SHAPE

“The Spirit’s presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all” (v7). Paul makes it clear that God doesn’t gift us to make us feel good about ourselves – but rather to enable us to serve others. The question then is how we do we identify our gifts and use them in God’s service?

I suggest we use our gifts by finding our 'SHAPE'.

At this point I am drawing upon a mnemonic devised by Rick Warren of Saddleback.

Warren writes: "Whenever God gives us an assignment, he always equips us for what we need to accomplish it. This tailor-made ('custom') combination of capabilities is called your SHAPE:

- Spiritual gifts
- Heart
- Abilities
- Personality
- Experience

According to Rick Warren each one of us needs to do five things:

- Unwrap our spiritual gifts
- Listen to our heart
- Apply our abilities
- Use our personality
- Employ our experience

Or to put it another way, Rick Warren says that when it comes to serving God, God does not want us to serve him out of a sense of a duty – but rather he wants us to serve him because we have a passion to serve others through using the gifts and abilities which we have, the personality and experience which are ours. In a very real sense, Christian service is about self-fulfilment – we are doing that for which God has made us.

I find this an enormously helpful approach. Gifts and abilities are to be linked with passion and experience. Only then do we look for opportunities for service.

This is the context for our Ministry Fair. Today we are presenting opportunities for service. But we are not wanting you to simply volunteer for anything that is going. But rather to look for opportunities where you can be happy and fulfilled in serving God.

5. OPPORTUNITIES FOR SERVICE

Emma has devised a marvellous list of opportunities. Let me highlight some of those opportunities:

Pastoral care

- We need more people willing to get involved in pastoral care – in particular we need more care group leaders. Are you a people person? Have you a gift of encouragement? Would you be willing to take responsibility for caring for a dozen or so people? Or if not a dozen, would you be willing to commit yourself to one person in need?

Social action

- We need people willing to act as befrienders on a Monday afternoon at Monday Club, or during a Wednesday at Victoria Club. Have you a gift of friendship? Do you enjoy playing board games? Are you free to give two afternoons or days a month?

General

- We need more people willing to get involved in catering. We need people to cook for Alpha on a Monday evening; to cook for seniors' lunches on Tuesdays; to cook for Victoria Club on Wednesdays; to help out at funeral teas; to bake cakes for ministers' anniversaries and other special occasions. Do you enjoy cooking? Or would you be willing just to wash up? Are you happy to be part of a team? Would you be free to help once a month?
- We need people to help clean the church. Would you enjoy being a Martha? We have a team of people who come in at 7 o'clock on a Monday morning. But there are other times of the day when people could clean: at one stage we had a young man cleaning the toilets after work on a Wednesday evening at 6 o'clock. Or maybe you could come in at a lunch-hour and clean some windows, or sweep around the front & side of the church?

Seniors

- Helping to plan or lead Outlook seeker services? Has God given you the gift of creativity? Incidentally, you don't have to be a senior citizen yourself – if Emma can speak at Outlook, so too perhaps could you?

Children, youth & families

- Teaching Light Factory – in particular on a Sunday evening. To quote Sue Parrotte, “we have a desperate for people to help with the evening Light Factory – we have 35 children – and if we don't do anything, we could lose a significant number of these children”. Sue is quite literally beside herself with concern. As I understand it, in May we could end up with having just 2 teachers. Have you a gift of teaching? Can you relate to children and young people? Or would you be willing to help with a crèche in the evening? Would you be willing to give up the first part of your Sunday evening – you could always be back in time for the main film on the TV.

Services:

- Doing a Bible reading – do you have a gift for reading in public? Perhaps at some stage in your life you had elocution lessons or were involved in drama. Would helping people hear God's Word be something you would enjoy?
- Setting up for communion. It means buying bread and arriving at church early to set up the table, and then clearing up afterwards. Would you like to be a means of grace to others?
- Leading prayers of intercession? This is a very specialised form of service – it is more than just having the ability to stand up and pray in front of people. It involves a degree creativity and imagination, a joy in using words which stretch people's minds?
- Singing in a worship band. In particular we need people who can sing in harmony. Have you a voice that has been trained? Could you offer this as a gift to God?
- Playing in a worship band. In particular, do you have an ability to play the bass-guitar?

- Donating flowers: would you like to remember a loved one by paying for flowers once a year, perhaps on the anniversary of a death? Alternatively, maybe you would like to celebrate your wedding anniversary or perhaps the birth of a grand-child by donating flowers?
- Arranging flowers: Yes, you could arrange as well as donate. Or perhaps simply arrange. Ideally we need a rota of at least four people. Again, we are looking for people who enjoy and are gifted at arranging flowers. It would probably mean coming in on a Saturday.

Ghana 2010

- Helping with the building project. Have you practical gifts such as plumbing, working with electricity, painting? Would you enjoy seeing a way of life to which no travel agent could never introduce you?
- Or maybe you feel you can't go yourself. What about sponsoring a young person to go to Ghana instead? Do you have joy in giving to others? Remember that in Romans giving is a gift!

Within the context of this morning's service I want you to look at the list of opportunities for service, and ask yourself: how might I use my gifts and abilities, my experience and my passion, to serve God. Walk around and look at some of the 'stalls'. Talk to people and see where your 'shape' might fit. Alternatively, just sit there and reflect.

After seven or eight minutes I will then call you back to your seats, and invite you to work your way through the response form. If you feel able, here and now, to fill it in, that will be great. If you would prefer to have more time to fill it in, then bring it with you next week. Please note, we are not wanting people to volunteer for everything going. We are wanting people to see where their gifts, passions and experience might fit.

Please note too that in filling in this form you are not committing yourself self irrevocably, nor are we in receiving your form committing ourselves to make use of your offer. We are wanting to explore together where people's gifts, passion, and experience might fit.

What we do want is to enable you to serve God in a way which delights God, meets a need, and fulfils you as a person.