

USING YOUR GIFTS

"For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established" (Romans 1:11).

One of the principal uses of the word spiritual is to designate the spiritual gifts which God gives to His people. They are spiritual gifts because the Holy Spirit bestows them, and their proper use is the responsibility of one who would live the spiritual life. And yet there are many believers who do not have any concept of the meaning of spiritual gifts, or any inkling of what their gifts might be, or any understanding of how gifts are used in service to others; consequently, they cannot live the spiritual life in its full expression. By contrast, the spiritual man will know and use his spiritual gifts.

What is a spiritual gift? The Greek word in the New Testament for spiritual gift usually refers to the special gifts or abilities given to man by God. A spiritual gift is a God-given ability for service. This simple definition incorporates the source of gifts (God-given), the meaning of gifts (abilities), and the purpose of gifts (service). If we keep in mind that a spiritual gift is primarily an ability, this will keep us from much of the confusion that exists in the minds of people concerning this subject. Many think of a spiritual gift as an office in the church which only a privileged few can ever occupy. Or else they consider spiritual gifts so out of reach of the ordinary believer that the best he can hope for is that sometime he might happen to discover some little gift and be allowed to exercise it in some small way. Both of these conceptions are wrong.

A spiritual gift is primarily an ability given to the individual. This means that the gift is not a place of service, for the gift is the ability, not where that ability is exercised. The gift of pastor, for instance, is usually associated with the office or position a man may occupy in the pastorate. But, in reality, the gift of pastor is the ability to give shepherd-like care to people, regardless of where this is done. Another good example which highlights the difference between the gift and the place where it is exercised is the gift of teaching. Most of us connect the gift of teaching with a formal classroom situation. It certainly ought to be exercised there, but it may be used under many other circumstances as well. Indeed, the Scriptures exhort the older women to "teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children" (Titus 2:4). Here is teaching done on a personal basis. The gift is the ability, and in the place where that ability is used. What benefits would come to any church if every member would realize that he could use spiritual gifts all the time and under many different circumstances.

A spiritual gift is not primarily a place of service; neither is it a particular age group ministry. The various age groups are the recipients of the exercise of gifts. To be sure there are specialized techniques for the different age groups, but the spiritual gift is the basic God-given ability which is channeled through various techniques to others. There are also numerous methods which may be used in the exercise of gifts, but these methods are not the gifts themselves. For instance, writing is a method, but teaching and exhortation are the gifts which may be used in an oral or written ministry. Thus the spiritual gift is the ability itself and not the place or method in or by which the ability is exercised. Spiritual gifts are not the positions we hold in the church or the methods we use; they are the basic God-given abilities for service.

What are the spiritual gifts? The spiritual gifts which are specifically listed in the Bible are the following: apostleship, prophecy, miracles, tongues, evangelism, pastor, ministering, teaching, faith, exhortation, discerning spirits, showing mercy, giving, and administration. All of these are not given in every generation. Three of the gifts, however, probably all Christians could have and use if they would. They are ministering, giving, and showing mercy. Romans 12:7-8 reads as follows: "Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness." Ministering means serving. It is the basic ability to help people, and there is no reason why every Christian cannot have and use this gift. Indeed, a spiritual and obedient Christian must and will do so. Showing mercy is akin to the gift of ministering and involves succoring those who are sick and afflicted. "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction" (James 1:27). All are not given equal opportunities to do this, but without this kind of activity there cannot be any true spirituality. Giving is the ability to distribute one's money to others, and it is to be done with simplicity, and with no thought of return or gain for oneself in any way. Giving proves one's spirituality or lack of it in the sight of God.

It is probably true to say that every believer can have more than one spiritual gift. Unless disobedience is present, all could, it seems, have three gifts to use in the service of God. Many will have more in varying combinations within their lives. Gifts may come to light for use at different times in a believer's life, but certainly a spiritual Christian will be using whatever combination of gifts is his for the glory of God. Service apart from the spiritual gifts is not spiritual service; it is only a manifestation of the activity of self.

Although it is God Who gives us spiritual gifts, and although it is the Spirit Who empowers us for the use of them, the believer himself may have a part in the development of his spiritual gifts. Even the most sacrificial dedication will not necessarily guarantee the best use of the spiritual gifts which one has. Yieldedness cannot make up for lack of proper development of gifts, though proper development can never take place without yieldedness.

The Bible gives two guidelines for the proper development of spiritual gifts. The first is expressed in these words: "But covet earnestly the best gifts" (I Corinthians 12:31). Here is obviously an instance in which the word covet is used in a good sense. The basic meaning of the word is "be zealous for", which can be directed toward good or evil ends. In this verse it means an ardent pursuit of the better gifts. Those better gifts have just been listed by Paul in verse 28: "And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues." Note that Paul here gives an order of priority to some of the spiritual gifts.

How can one ardently pursue the best gifts? It is certainly not a matter of sitting down and conjuring up enough faith to be able to receive them like lightning from heaven. Indeed the word but that opens verse thirty-one indicates that we have a part to play in this. Coveting the best gifts is a matter of diligent self-preparation so as to be able to present to the Lord the very best faculties to be used in the exercise of the spiritual gifts which He gives. For instance, if one covets the gift of teaching, which is third in Paul's priority list, he undoubtedly will have to spend

many years developing that gift. A Bible teacher who knows the original languages of the Scriptures will be a better teacher than one who does not know them, all other factors being equal. But learning Hebrew and Greek is not a matter of faith; it requires a lot of hard work. A good teacher will also know the best techniques for communicating the truth. To be sure, these may be learned from experience, but even this requires disciplined self-preparation just as does the more profound classroom method. In developing spiritual gifts, the spiritual Christian will certainly be asking the Lord frequently if he is doing all that he can to develop the gifts God has given him.

The second guideline is this: Be attentive to the ministry of others. When Paul expressed his desire to go to Rome to see the believers there he said that one of his purposes was "that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established" (Romans 1:11). What Paul evidently wished to do for the Romans was to deepen and further their comprehension of the purposes of God through the exercise of his gift of teaching. It was not that Paul could bestow spiritual gifts, but he could impart the benefit of his spiritual gifts. But, of course, if the full benefit was to be received by the Roman Christians they would have to be attentive to the apostle's ministry. No benefit would come to a believer, for instance, who was at home when Paul was ministering in the congregation. Less benefit would come to another who happened to be present in the meeting but whose mind was wandering while Paul spoke. These very simple matters -- lack of attendance and lack of attention -- are still reasons today why some never develop fully their spiritual gifts. God has given gifted men to His churches "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12). This process should be a never ending cycle. Gifted people minister to others who are thereby developed so that they in turn can minister to others who are thereby built up so that they can exercise their developed gifts on others who in turn can do likewise. We can break that cycle either by not using or by not developing fully the gifts God has graciously bestowed on us. Not even the most spiritual Christian ever gets to the point where he cannot benefit from the exercise of the gifts of others.

How can one discover his gifts? This is not an easy question to answer. Nevertheless, three suggestions may help to answer it.

I. Be Informed.

In other words, know what spiritual gifts there are. It is possible that you may discover that you already have a gift or two. Some may not have known that showing kindness to others is a spiritual gift. A man and his wife wanted very much to see a spectacular view from a certain very expensive resort hotel. But since they lived on a very strict budget they decided that the only way they could ever do this was to go to the hotel for breakfast which would be the least expensive of the three meals. This they did, and furthermore they ordered the cheapest breakfast on the menu. However, when the man went to pay the bill he was charged what seemed to him an exorbitant price for pancakes. They had both wondered why the menu had not given prices for any of the meals but they assured themselves that pancakes would certainly be one of the lowest priced breakfasts. And then to their chagrin they discovered that even pancakes were very expensive. And then the truth came to them. This was a table d'hote, not an a la carte, menu, and they could have had any breakfast or all of them for the same price as their pancakes. But then it was too late to enjoy the full satisfaction of what had been offered

them. So it is with far too many Christians. They do not know, or sometimes they do not want to know, all that God could give them by way of spiritual gifts. So, be fully informed.

II. Be Willing.

If we are unwilling in any area, then God may not be able to let us use some gift; and conversely, if we are completely willing to do anything or to go anywhere, the Lord may bring to light gifts which we never dreamed that we had. Many miss the full use of their gifts simply because they will not tie themselves down to a regular Sunday School class or some other job in the church. We must be completely and unreservedly willing to do anything for the Lord if we would know the fullest use of our spiritual gifts.

III. Be Active.

The exercise of one gift may lead to the discovery of other gifts. For example, what gift did Philip have? When he is first introduced in the book of Acts we find him exercising the gift of serving (6:5). What he did was to distribute the relief money to a group of bickering women, and that was neither an easy nor an exalted job. Apparently he did it faithfully, and having proved himself in the difficult and menial task, the Lord brought to light in his life the added gift of evangelism (8:5). Suppose that Philip had said to the apostles that he did not feel called to serve in the capacity of ministering to widows. He might never have been allowed to evangelize the Samaritans. Faithful activity in the one area led to the discovery of a gift in another area.

Actually this first gift we have any record of Philip using was the basic gift of serving, helping, or ministering. Does this not give us a clue for our own lives? Instead of waiting to discover what spiritual gifts we may have been given, why not simply begin to exercise the gift of helping, or the gift of showing mercy, or even the gift of giving? While we are faithfully using these basic gifts perhaps God will bring to light other gifts in our lives. This kind of activity is one of the prime responsibilities of the spiritual Christian.

As Christians, we need to learn to put our little selves into the hands of God. If we will do that, He will amplify and magnify that which we possess in such a way as to glorify Himself and bless others. God often uses weak instruments to accomplish His great purposes.

When the Lord Jesus wanted to meet the need of a hungry multitude, He turned to His disciples and inquired what they would do, but they had no solution except to go to town and buy a vast quantity of bread. Andrew, the apostle who was always looking for opportunities to serve his Lord, remarked: "There is a lad here, who has five barley loaves and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?" I suppose this boy was just as hungry as the others in that huge crowd. Somebody went to him and asked him for his five little homemade barley loaves and his two little fishes. He readily gave them to the Lord in order that He might use them in feeding the multitude. All that the Lord asks of us as Christians is that we dedicate just what we have to His service. Nobody ever presented himself and his possessions to the Lord who was not blessed and used. This lad reached out beyond the day in which he lived to the days in which we live in influence for the Lord. The Lord's use of little things brings honor and glory to Himself, to Whom all praise belongs.

God wants us, whom He has saved, to serve Him right where we are and with whatever we have. You hold something in your hand which the Lord can use. But He cannot use you or it unless you surrender yourself and what you have to Him. Use what God has given you today because tomorrow may be too late.

"Hear ye the Master's call,
 'Give Me thy best!'
For, be it great or small,
 That is His test.
Do then the best you can,
 Not for reward,
Not for the praise of man,
 But for the Lord!"