

Which Gift is Best?

1 Corinthians 12: 1 – 11

Makemie Presbyterian Church

January 17, 2010

### **1 Corinthians 12: 1 - 11**

<sup>12-1</sup> Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. <sup>2</sup>You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. <sup>3</sup>Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>4</sup>Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup>and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; <sup>6</sup>and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.

<sup>7</sup>To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

<sup>8</sup>To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, <sup>9</sup>to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, <sup>10</sup>to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.

<sup>11</sup>All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

This ends the reading.

Here is a story of a certain sea captain & her chief engineer who were having an argument as to which one of them was the more important to the ship. Failing to agree, they resorted to the unique idea of swapping places. The chief ascended to the bridge, and the captain dived into the engine room. After a couple of hours, the captain suddenly appeared on the deck covered with oil & soot.

“Chief!” she yelled, wildly waving aloft a monkey wrench. “You’ll have to come down here; I can’t make her go!”

“Of course you can’t,” replied the chief. “She’s aground!”

The solution to this problem is a proper understanding of the subject of spiritual gifts. And while there are many books on the subject of spiritual gifts they often make this subject something far more mystical & mysterious & complicated than it really is. Now, you all know that if there is anyone who can look at a matter with simplicity, it is me. My friends & my family, often remind me how simple I really am!

One of the ways we can measure the importance of a principle or a doctrine is to determine the amount of space devoted to it in the Bible. Matters mentioned infrequently might not be as crucial as those frequently

dealt with. If we use this standard of measurement, the subject of spiritual gifts is a vital one, for we find gifts addressed specifically in four major portions of Scripture: 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14; Romans chapter 12; Ephesians chapter 4; & 1 Peter chapter 4. In addition to these central passages, spiritual gifts are mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. Spiritual gifts must be important to the Spirit of God who inspired the writing of the Word; so they must be important to us.

As Ted read just a moment ago, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.”

Now we know that every Christian is a gifted person. And it's vital to our discipleship to believe that. When we do, then we seek to discover the gifts we have been given, do everything we can to develop them to the full, & then put them to use in the life of the church. We need to appreciate & constantly remind ourselves that the natural abilities & spiritual gifts that we possess and the ability to develop & use them are from the Holy Spirit & to the glory of God.

So what is a spiritual gift? How is it defined? A spiritual gift is a special ability given by the Holy Spirit to every believer, to be used to minister to others & build up the body of Christ, the local church. What does the New Testament tell us about spiritual gifts? That every Christian has at least one spiritual gift; but that no one receives all the gifts & that no single gift is given to everyone. You or I can't earn or work for a spiritual gift but rather they are gifts of grace.

There are gifts that communicate God's Word & educate God's people such as preaching, teaching, encouragement & mission

There are gifts to demonstrate God's love such as service, mercy, hospitality, compassion & giving. All Christians are called to be generous, but some are given the particular gift of giving. There are gifts that help us worship & celebrate God's presence such as music & art. There are prayer-related gifts such as intercession & gifts that support the church's purposes, like officers & other leaders.

If you are still at the stage of discovering what your gift or gifts are, go through the New Testament passages, & make a list of the gifts mentioned there. Although that won't give you an exhaustive list, it will certainly give you an understanding of the range of gifts. As you begin to identify your gift & develop in this area, you may find that others will recognize your gift.

One of the responsibilities of the leaders of the church, especially the elders, is to help identify gifts & to encourage us to use those gifts for the building up of the local congregation.

Sometimes you hear people say that it is best not to involve yourself much in ministry in the local church until you know what gift or gifts you have. I don't believe that that is the correct approach. God's gifts will often be discovered as we make ourselves active in God's service; with serving or encouraging or teaching or hospitality or administration. But our secondary ministries will include serving in other areas of the body where we are needed. We sometimes are called to do things which involve us in areas of work for which we're not greatly gifted, just because the work has to be done. My former colleague Lacy used to say, "The watchword of the Christian sluggard is, 'that is not my gift.'"

It's when we serve together in the life of the church that the bonds between us are strengthened & we grow in love & respect for one another – that is why working together in the kitchen, singing in the choir, teaching & attending Sunday school, or serving on committees or even having fun together is so beneficial.

Once a God-given gift has been recognized it needs to be developed & used. But it must be used to the glory of God, because there is great

danger in using a God-given gift for our own advantage; pride being the result. Remember in Acts (8:9-25) the story of Simon the Sorcerer? For some time he had practiced sorcery in a city in Samaria. “He boasted that he was someone great & all the people, both high & low, gave him their attention & exclaimed, “This man is the divine power known as the Great Power.” Simon became a believer in Jesus Christ through the ministry of Philip & was baptized. He followed Philip everywhere “astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.” Soon Simon was offering the apostles, Peter & John, money if they could give him the ability to enable people to receive the Holy Spirit through the laying on of his hands. Peter’s answer is blunt & to the point, “May your money perish with you because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God.”

It is the responsibility of the church leaders to help members develop & use their spiritual gifts. The vision & task of leaders is to assist members of the church in pursuing ministries God has called them to fulfill.

The development of a person’s gift may also involve being mentored by someone else who has the same gift & who has been using it well for some time. Those of us involved in ministry in any given area of church life should always be on the lookout for others who have a spiritual gift so that

we may encourage & mentor each other to develop & use our gifts. Above all; gifts are developed through use.

It has been said that spiritual gifts are “tools to be used, not toys to be played with”. If you use a tool as a toy, it can be very dangerous. It is vital that the development of our Christian character goes hand in hand with our discovery & use of our spiritual gifts. Our Christian character has to do with the fruit of the Spirit developing in our lives. Our spiritual gifts, on the other hand, have to do with our ministry in the church. If we use our gifts but don't develop a godly character, our enemy, Satan, can use those same gifts to tear down & destroy rather than for their true purpose of building up the body of Christ.

It's vital that spiritual gifts are exercised in love. It's love that is essential for service for God. You will remember that the one thing, the only thing, the risen Lord questioned Peter about on the shore of the Sea of Galilee prior to commissioning him to care for the flock, was love. Why not faith or commitment or zeal or a plethora of gifts? I think it's because the basic qualification for Christian service is love. Other qualities may be desirable but love is completely indispensable. We see that in 1 Corinthians chapter 13, don't we? Although this passage is very popular at weddings, it is not about marriage but about ministry & the use of our

spiritual gifts in the life of the church? Too often spiritual gifts are used in a competitive way or to build up someone's ego – all at the expense of relationships within the life of the church. It is a chilling thought that despite all the great spiritual gifts which the church at Corinth had, the ministry carried out could be negated & come to nothing because of a lack of love. It is a frightening thought, isn't it, that we can negate our ministry, that the use of our spiritual gift can be wasted & even harmful to the church, if we don't exercise it in love.

What is love? A feeling? An intimate setting? Having the people around me who make me feel good? No. No. It is an attitude of will which is demonstrated in our actions, in the way we treat & deal with others. There is no boasting – “What a great ministry I have in this church. I am so gifted”. Love doesn't cheer when people make mistakes. In the ministry of believers there are heartaches & disappointments & trials, but love bears all things, hangs in there & perseveres. There is great power in love when it flows from the heart of God's people – it transforms lives, it builds people up in their faith & love for others & shapes the character of Christ in us. We eagerly desire the spiritual gifts but must always exercise them in love.

May God help us here at Makemie Memorial Presbyterian Church to work together so that the gifts, the callings, & the ministries of each & every

one of us are identified, developed & fully exercised so that the church grows as a body & builds itself up in love, as each part does its work for the extension of Christ's kingdom & to the glory of God. Amen.