

Today our focus is on unwrapping your spiritual gifts, and I would like to use the image of a present . . . think of a present that is packaged and wrapped and ready to be opened. It could be a birthday present, a Christmas present, an anniversary gift. There is something about gifts and presents that are always exciting . . . because we don't know exactly what is inside of them! But it is impossible to fully appreciate the gifts until they have actually been opened.

But today I want to think specifically about the “spiritual gifts” that God has given to each one of us . . . and I want to provide a framework and a context for you. I want to lay out some very simple understandings that will help you, as you discern and unwrap your own spiritual gifts. Maybe you are already aware of your “spiritual gifts.” Maybe you think you have already discerned them. But stay with me for a few moments today and let me provide the background for understanding these spiritual gifts by placing them into 3 basic principles for discernment.

These principles are simple, and straightforward. And they come from our 2nd Lesson - I Peter - chapter 4. The discernment and understanding of “spiritual gifts” is always nurtured and wrapped in prayer, in love and in grace.

- In vs. 7 Paul says: “be clear minded and self-controlled **so that you can pray . . .**”
- In vs. 8 he says: “above all **love each other deeply** from the heart . . .”
- The rest of the chapter is about using these spiritual gifts **because they are all expressions of God's grace . . .** “*God's grace in its various forms . . . everyone should use whatever gifts they have received, so that God's generosity can flow through you.*”

In addition to these guiding principles of prayer, love and grace . . . the discernment of spiritual gifts is always part of a larger context . . . a context of community. In other words, our search for discernment of our spiritual gifts is never a private spiritual journey. It must always be done within the context of community.

In the Small Group Study Guide, you will find a simple questionnaire which will help you get started. You will go through the questionnaire, answer the questions indicated and then score yourself. But that is only the beginning of the discernment process!

The discernment of spiritual gifts can never be done effectively alone. In fact, the discernment of spiritual gifts is based on community. By sharing, listening, praying for and encouraging each other, we have a much better sense of the nature of our unique spiritual gifts and how they can be used to build up the body of Christ.

This discernment of “spiritual gifts” is actually very close to Luther's understanding of vocation and calling. Luther believed that each baptized Christian has been given special spiritual gifts . . . special talents and abilities. He believed that they originate in baptism, where each of us has been “*sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.*”

Our baptism is our mark that God has gifted us in special ways to serve Him and to serve others in ministry. Our challenge becomes discerning these gifts, understanding these gifts and then using these gifts to build up the “body of Christ.” (the church!)

When spiritual gifts are used outside the context of community, they can easily become divisive. For example, if a person assumes that God has made them the one prophetic voice for a particular cause or issue . . .

- that they have been called to speak out against all those who do not affirm that cause
- that their gift of prophecy is to say whatever they feel in whatever way they choose, no matter what effect it has on the community
- then the context of discernment becomes an issue!
- That is because genuine spiritual gifts are designed to build up the body. And if the spiritual gift does not build up the body, then it cannot truly be a “spiritual gift!”

If the spiritual gift is not “*building up the body of Christ,*” but rather dividing it, then no matter how morally pure or righteous that viewpoint or perspective is, it may be coming from another spirit, and not the Holy Spirit. That is because of the three guiding principles in discernment are PRAYER, LOVE and GRACE.

Pray Sincerely for One Another

We talk a lot about prayer in the church. Everybody claims it is a good thing to do, but according to recent surveys, only about 30% of us do it on a regular basis. This is not meant to be a judgment, simply an accurate representation of our actions. We talk a lot about prayer, but we don’t practice it very well.

There are two important results of prayer . . .

- We become closer to Jesus, which is the very heart of our Christian life and experience.
- Prayer aids and blesses those we pray for

It is important for us to be clear-minded as we engage in prayer. What I mean by being clear-minded is that we use our minds and our hearts as we pray for others. We use the thinking and evaluating capacities of our heart and mind and look at situations maturely despite fears and anxieties. We avoid hasty or prejudiced judgments. We must also be self-controlled (the Bible uses the word “sober”). We cannot afford mental laziness in our prayer life. That simply lulls into sin. Instead we should expect God’s work to happen through prayer;

Martin Luther actually preached a powerful sermon on this text in which he addressed his congregation on the topic of soberness and spiritual discipline: “*Since you are a people called to contend with a powerful spirit which is more intent on seizing your souls than is the wolf on seizing the sheep, it is essential you should take thought how to withstand him. Resistance is affected only through faith and prayer.*”

But soberness and vigilance are necessary to enable one to pray. When reason is dethroned, they are rendered incapable of respecting anything, or of performing any good work. Therefore, the ability to pray and call upon God has been taken from them and the devil overcomes and devours them at his will.

The diligence in prayer which characterized Christians of the primitive Church, even while undergoing great persecution, is apparent to us. Some of them, according to St. Augustine, carried their vigils to such extent as at times to abstain from food for four days. True, this was going to somewhat of an extreme, particularly when later the practice came to be an example and a commandment. Yet their habit of perfect sobriety morning, evening and at all times is commendable.

Everything related to our spiritual gifts must be surrounded by prayer. If we are praying and listening, the discernment and understanding of what God is saying to us is increased exponentially.

Love One Another Deeply

There is nothing more important than love, but deep love is difficult: “*agape at full stretch.*” The truth is that love, (as the saying goes), covers a multitude of sins. When love is your guiding principle, then major offenses and actual apologies, as well as minor wrongs and insensitive remarks are ignored or discarded. But where love is lacking, every word and action is viewed with suspicion and misunderstanding. A community without love is a place of bitterness and resentment, but where love abounds small and great offences are overlooked and most importantly, are forgiven.

As you strive to love one another, there are at least two ways to mess things up:

1. **Doing loving things without a real heart for people . . .** remaining emotionally and spiritually un-invested! Without stereotyping or categorizing types of people . . . this trait can often be a characteristic of guys, and I put myself in this group. Many men just need time to be alone. Some marriage counselors call it “*cave time.*” We just need to get away from our jobs, our responsibilities, our obligations. And sometimes it comes across as insensitivity and not caring. Some of it has to do with our insecurity. Some of it has to do with our personalities. Most guys would probably say something like this: “*If you call me and you need me, I’ll be there. But I also don’t mind that much if you don’t call me!*” It is our tendency to sometimes forget about people, to sometimes stop praying for people, and to sometimes have a difficult time understanding relationships. **We can do loving things, but we are not always emotionally and spiritually invested!**
2. **Doing loving things and expecting something in return . . .** This is translated into something like this: I will show love to you and lay my life down for you, as long as you reciprocate that friendship. Again, without stereotyping, this characteristic can be found in some women.

The idea is that I will happily sacrifice time and money and part of myself for you, as long as you praise and thank me, as long as you and I are close.

But when you don't hold up your end of the bargain or when the relationship gets strained, I can get frustrated and upset with you. I can do the guilt trips on you very well, and I can even get kind of nasty with you, because I don't feel appreciated! *(Although you may never know it because I stew over these things internally. Remember, I still want your friendship and praise and if I let you know what is really going on I almost guarantee that I won't get it).* **We can do loving things, but we still expect some kind of recognition and thanks in return!**

The key for all of us, in our relationships with people in the church, male and female, is to focus all of our energies and our zeal on knowing Christ better and loving Him more. The people in our fellowship should then become a means to that end of pleasing Christ and seeing Him more clearly.

Use Your Gifts for One Another

Each one's spiritual gift is an expression of how each believer contributes to the whole body of Christ. Our spiritual gifts are an expression of our grace and God's grace through us. The Greek word for gift and for grace is the same, "*charis*." Spiritual gifts, "*charismata*" also have the same root meaning. Our spiritual gifts are expressions of grace . . . God's grace to us and our grace to others!

And we share God's grace to others by serving others. In turn we are served by others' gifts. In the church, there are three general categories of gifts: **MINISTRY GIFTS**, **MOTIVATIONAL & PRACTICAL GIFTS** and **CHARISMATIC GIFTS**. But these 3 categories can also be divided into two basic groups:

- gifts of speech: as speaking the very words of God - responsibility to faithfully communicate what God lays on your heart to say
- gifts of service (action): in the strength God supplies - responsibility to faithfully carry out what God lays on your heart to do
- The results of using these gifts are that in all things God is praised through Jesus Christ and Christ's body, the church, is built up and strengthened.

I listened to a well-known Christian artist, who will remain nameless, a few years ago. He had recorded a number of CD's. He had done a huge number of concerts across the country, and was pretty well known in music circles. But he said that his career was not working as he had hoped. He certainly had recognition, but he said in those days, it was all about me!

"And it wasn't until I began to see my musical gift as a spiritual gift, designed to build up the church, that things really started to happen. And I felt that my gift was being used for the right reason. It was never about me. It was always about God."

As you seek to discern and unwrap your own “spiritual gifts,” it is so important to reflect on God’s love for you, to think about God’s sacrifice of His Son for you. It’s about asking God to open your eyes and give you a fresh view of who God really is today. It’s about recognizing that without the context of community, our talents and abilities and spiritual gifts are not doing what they are supposed to do!

Pray sincerely for one another! Love one another deeply! Use your spiritual gifts for each other . . . to build up the body of Christ!