

09/15/19

For the Common Good 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 (NRSV)
Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

For the next few weeks, we're going to be learning about spiritual gifts. For some of us this will be a review of things we've learned and for others this will be new. The foundation for spiritual gifts about which the Apostle Paul doesn't want us to be ignorant or uninformed is the belief that **God gives to every believer certain gifts that, when used properly, allow the body of Christ to fulfill its role and the individual to develop into the person God created him or her to be.** God thinks so much of us that God has given us a gift with which we can be a blessing to others in Jesus' name. The gifts are primarily for the common good of building up the Body of Christ which is the church, but we're blessed, and we benefit when we use them. Listen to *1 Corinthians 12:4-11*, "Now there are varieties of **gifts**, but the same **Spirit**; and there are varieties of **services**, but the same **Lord**; and there are varieties of **activities**, but it is the same **God** who activates **all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.** To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to **the same Spirit**, to another faith **by the same Spirit**, to another gifts of healing **by the one Spirit**, 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. All these are activated **by one and the same Spirit**, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses."

Anyone who enjoys listening to music, especially a good jazz band or a symphony, understands the principle and value of differences and diversity coming together for the common good to produce something greater than its individual parts. When our son Nathan was in high school and diligently practicing his trombone every day as a member of the Nauset Regional High School jazz band, I can tell you it wasn't terribly exciting to listen to; that wasn't his fault, it wasn't that he wasn't good, it's just the trombone part for a jazz band is quite different than a tenor saxophone or a trumpet, for example. A trombone isn't usually carrying the melody, a trombone is usually playing a bass line underneath the other instruments. When Greg joined the jazz band playing trumpet, and he practiced, I could say, "I recognize that song," which was refreshing. But when you put Nathan and Greg together with all the other students on all their instruments, the band made terrific music, as anyone who has ever listened to the Nauset Jazz Band any year can attest.

Like a good jazz band, there's great diversity within the Body of Christ which is the Church, and our differences are by God's design. We don't all play trombone or trumpet. When all of us come together and participate, there's music that creates a mood, communicates a message, and moves the Spirit. When unique individuals come together and do our part for the common good, our diverse contributions enable the ministry and message of Christ to be accomplished more effectively in greater ways. Understanding our uniqueness and appreciating other's differences is necessary if we're to serve as God intended.

"Spiritual gifts are special abilities distributed by the Holy Spirit to every believer according to God's design and grace for the common good of the Body of Christ."

Some examples of spiritual gifts include administration, encouragement, evangelism, faith, giving, helps, hospitality, intercession, leadership, mercy, shepherding, teaching, and wisdom. We're all called to intercede in prayer, to give of our resources, help other people, be hospitable and welcoming, to be merciful, it's just that some of us are more gifted at these things than others. There are also people in this room who are gifted and called to do ministry in ways you have no interest in and in which you probably wouldn't be very fruitful or effective. The Body of Christ is a collection of gifts that are as diverse as the cells within the human body. Everyone is valuable and valued because we have a gift to contribute to the Body of Christ. Each of us is called to loving loyalty to Christ and to loving and serving one another.

Paul makes it clear that Spiritual gifts are God given. They're divine endowments used for spiritual purposes. They're the abilities God has given us to make our unique contribution to the Lord's work in the world. Spiritual gifts allow us to serve one another better. We're to serve with our gifts as followers of Christ to glorify God and build up others. The gifts are for the common good of the Body of Christ. While our spiritual gifts can be used for service outside the local church, we can't neglect their use within the church.

The scriptures are totally clear about when God gives spiritual gifts to us: some think when a person becomes a Christian and receives the Holy Spirit; some think at birth. Neither of these can be proved or disproved in the Bible. A person may have more than one spiritual gift and like a talent or a muscle, spiritual gifts grow stronger and are enhanced as they're used. God doesn't hold us accountable for spiritual gifts we don't have. We are responsible, however, for those we've been given.

What was one of the best gifts you've ever received or given? What made it special? Imagine how your life would have been different if you didn't give or receive that gift? Imagine if it was a gift someone was giving you and you chose not to open it? Or if you opened it, and never used it? That would've been a waste wouldn't it?

Yesterday I led a graveside service for the mother of a former teacher at Eddy Elementary School in Brewster. Teachers are used to receiving small gifts from their students. One man who taught for many years shared the following experience. "Every Christmas most of the students would give me a token gift. After a while, you didn't have to be a fortune teller to guess what the gifts would be. Especially if it came in a long flat box. It was a handkerchief. It got to a point where I never opened those flat boxes. I just stacked them in my closet. Whenever I needed a handkerchief, I opened one up. One day I opened a box and inside was an antique pocket watch. All the time I had been given an antique pocket watch, and I didn't know it."

What was the impact of that teacher failing to unwrap his gift? He lost the joy and benefit of having and using a lovely antique pocket watch. How many of us are missing out because we think we have no gift of value to offer or because we haven't unwrapped what the Spirit has given us? How about the student and family that gave such a thoughtful and generous gift? Can you imagine how you would feel if you were the student who had given your teacher such a precious and valuable gift as an expression of gratitude and love? How would you feel when

the gift you gave was never acknowledged, appreciated or used? How does God feel when we act like that teacher and shut our spiritual potential up in a closet and never unwrap and use it? How does the Lord respond when we fail to acknowledge, appreciate or use our spiritual gift?

We get a pretty good idea how God feels about it in the parable of the talents in the *Gospel of Matthew 25:14-30*. In that story the servant who buried his master's treasure in the ground and never put it to any use is chewed out by his master, loses what he was given, and is thrown out of his master's presence and into the outer darkness. Ouch. There's something valuable and rare about every person, however, we may not realize or appreciate ourselves or others in this way. Perhaps there's more to us and to other people than we know.

The Bible gives several reasons why discovering and using our spiritual gifts is essential for each of us and for the church. Spiritual gifts are the primary way the Spirit accomplishes much of what God does in the world through the church. As individual Christians, we won't fulfill our discipleship until and unless we discover and use our spiritual gifts for the common good. Unity grows stronger as we find our place in the Body of Christ. God is glorified and every member is a minister who can serve others. Knowing and using our gifts enables us to accomplish the mission of the church.

Another benefit of emphasizing spiritual gifts is avoiding burnout. Merely running the church organization can be time consuming and even draining. People who are equipped to use their spiritual gifts don't burn out as easily. I could stand here all morning and tell you the names of people here at BBC who are great servants of God who serve so faithfully and fruitfully in areas where they're passionate and gifted and they would say almost to a person that they get more out of serving and helping others than the people they are serving.

I don't have a problem with people stepping away from a place of ministry because they don't feel gifted or called to do it. However, it's important to understand that just because something is hard, difficult, or challenging, that doesn't mean you aren't supposed to do it. There was nothing easy about Jesus' ministry or that of Paul. It's in the hard, challenging seasons of life that God tends to grow us the most and when we often learn the most about ourselves. I've said for a very long time, that one of my goals at BBC is to have every single member and regular attender involved in a ministry so that someone who came here for the first time could approach anyone in the lobby and ask, "What ministry are you serving in?" And they'd get an answer from anyone they stopped. "I volunteer in the nursery, I'm a Sunday School teacher, I host Fellowship Time on Sunday mornings after worship, I'm on the Mission Team, I sing in the choir, I serve in the media booth, I'm part of Cooks Who Care, I serve with Caring Heart to Heart when we have memorial services..." The list goes on and on. All those areas I mentioned are ones in which we have opportunities for people to serve, help others, and be a blessing. If someone comes up to you after this service and you couldn't answer the question of where you're currently serving, please talk to me, David or Barbara and we'll try to help you get connected. I will make one exception to the currently serving rule. If you're 90 years old or older you have my permission to say, "At this point in my life, I'm not serving as I once did, but

I'm praying for the church and our staff and its volunteers, and I'm seeking to be a source of encouragement to others."

Finally, several negative things happen as a result of not using our spiritual gifts. The Body of Christ is not complete because some of God's gifts are overlooked. Some core ministries such as mercy, justice and evangelism may not be carried out as much as they should because many members with these gifts are running the organization rather than doing hands on ministry. If people are sitting on their gifts and not serving, then the ministry of the church ends up being carried by a smaller number of people who are doing many things. This can lead to an overworked minority and inactive people who may attend worship on Sunday, but that's their only point of contact with the Body of Christ. The Dead Sea is precisely that because it takes in water from the Jordan River, but it doesn't let any flow out to another source. Individuals who just take and receive and never give are like the Dead Sea; there's no life or vitality present that comes from sharing and giving. We live in a time when virtually every commercial message we hear is about "what we deserve," and getting things for ourselves so we have a happy, comfortable wonderful life. This is not a Biblical message. The Bible tells us that life is found in loving, giving, sharing, and serving; not in selfishness, accumulating, hoarding, and not caring about others. One of the reasons why our nation is in a bad place right now is because too many people are focused on themselves and too few are focused on the common good.

In *1 Corinthians 12*, Paul is telling the believers in Corinth, who were too focused on themselves rather than the common good that they needed to grow in their understanding and stop being so selfish and prideful. Spiritual gifts are the great leveler of persons in the church. Each spiritual gift is equally important. Exercising our spiritual gifts is to be done with a servant's heart and mind out of the gratitude in our heart for what Christ has done in our life. Jesus said he didn't come to be served, but to serve, and that's our task as his disciples. Servants don't feel it is their duty to "pay their dues" nor do they stop serving because "they've done their time." Being a Christian is not like being a dues-paying member of a country club, nor is it a prison sentence where we get time off for good behavior and then we get to go free to do whatever we want. As servants of Christ, we use our spiritual gifts because we want to, because it gives us fulfillment, and we realize we're doing our part to build up the Body of Christ and to build up and bless other people. This is how we grow more mature in our faith and more skilled in whatever ministry we're engaged in.

The Biblical model of the church is for the people, the members of the body, to take care of one another, that's not the pastor's job. A pastor's role is to help equip people to discover, learn about, and serve in an area where they're gifted. The one God we worship in whom there is unity and diversity, has given the many of us a diversity of gifts for us to discover and use for the common good. An ancient Hindu proverb says that at one time all people thought they were divine, so Brahma decided to hide the gift of divinity. But where to hide it? One said, "Hide it on the highest mountain." But Brahma said, "No, some day people will climb the highest mountain." Some said, "Hide it in the depths of the sea." But Brahma said, "No, some

day people will plumb the depths of the sea. Anyone else have a suggestion?" All were silent. Then Brahma had an idea: "We will hide it in each human. They will never think to look there."

Psalm 8 tells us that we are created a little lower than God. Jesus tells us the kingdom of heaven is within us. There is a valuable treasure within us waiting to be discovered and shared; if we'll only take the time to unpack it and put it into service.

We want to be the kind of church that encourages each person to look within to discover her or his gifts for the purpose of sharing those gifts with the Body of Christ to glorify God and build up other people. Paul writes in *1 Corinthians 14:12*, "**Since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church.**" Our goal as a Christian church is to have fully devoted followers of Christ making our unique contribution in a meaningful place of service as we love, grow and share together. What a blessing it is to know that God thinks so much of us that the Spirit has given us a gift with which we can be a blessing to others in Christ's name as we strive together for the common good of impacting the world for which Jesus died and rose again.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What was one of the best gifts you've ever received or given? What was one of the best gifts you've ever received or given? What made it special?
2. What comes to mind for you when you hear the phrase, "The common good?" Why is being committed to the common good important for a family, a church, a group, a community, a nation?
3. Why do you think Paul emphasizes words and phrases like "one and the same Spirit," so many times in *1 Corinthians 12:4-11*? What might that be an indication of in the church in Corinth?
4. Since the Corinthians were so proud of their spirituality (see *1 Corinthians 1:12, 4:8, 5:2*), how might *verses 12:7 & 11* surprise them?
5. How might the diversity of spiritual gifts and their unified purpose relate to the unity of the Father, Son and Spirit?
6. If you're in a group, take turns sharing with each member what strengths or spiritual gifts you see in them. If you're reflecting yourself, what spiritual gifts might the Spirit have given you? In both cases, what examples can you give that provide evidence of specific gifts?
7. How are you currently using your spiritual gifts for the common good at BBC? If you don't know what your gifts are or are not currently serving, please arrange to speak with one of the pastors.