

BODY-BUILDING
“Making Sense Of Spiritual Gifts”

“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”

It's been said that “necessity's the mother of invention”...

And, that certainly proved to be the case for a Nebraska farmer named Herman Ostry, who came up with a unique way of dealing with a recurring problem on his farm.

The issue?

Well, Ostry's barn sat next to a nearby creek and so his barn floors were always muddy and wet.

The breaking point, however, came one year when the creek flooded and it left over two feet of standing water in Ostry's barn.

Well, figuring “enough's enough” -- he contacted a company to get a bid on how much it would cost to actually move his barn to higher ground.

But, the cost turned out to be prohibitive. And so, one night while he and his family were sitting around the table, Ostry teasingly remarked that if they just had enough people they could simply pick the barn up and move it to higher ground themselves.

Of course, everybody had a good chuckle.

But, Ostry's off-the-cuff comment got his son Mike to thinking.

And then, he began to do some calculating.

What would it take to be able to actually pick up the entire barn and move it themselves?

Well, Mike took some measurements and ran some figures.

Counting the individual boards and timbers, he calculated that the barn itself weighed approximately 16,640 pounds.

He also estimated that a steel grid attached to the barn for stability would add another 3,000 or so pounds – bring the total weight of the barn to just over 19,000 pounds!

Or, almost 10 tons!

At that weight he figured it would take around 350 people – each lifting a little over 50 pounds – to actually be able to move that barn and make it work.

And suddenly – the idea didn't seem so crazy after all!

Now, it just so happened that the town where they lived was planning its centennial celebration later that summer.

So, Herman and Mike went to the centennial committee with their idea for a really unique barn-raising. The committee loved the idea and agreed to make it part of their celebration.

Mike then got busy actually designing the steel lattice work that would be attached to the barn – including handles where folks could grab hold.

And, on July 30th, 1988 – with a local TV crew on site and more than 4,000 onlookers – 344 people took their places around the barn...

Grabbed hold of the handles Mike had welded to the steel lattice work...

And, they picked that barn up and walked it about 50 yards uphill and set it on its new foundation!

Now, the reason I share this with you today – besides it being just a really great story – is that it’s an apt illustration for what this new sermon series on Spiritual Gifts is all about!

Spiritual gifts are about everybody doing their part in the ways God has enabled them best – for building up the Body of Christ!

But, as we dive in today I need to remind you of that old adage which asks the question: “How do you eat an elephant?”

The answer is, of course, “one bite at a time!”

And, this will be our approach in tackling the incredibly complex issue of Spiritual Gifts!

We’re going to take it a little bit at a time.

You see, when it comes to Spiritual Gifts, not only are there innumerable gifts we could actually talk about...

But, we want to make sure and lay the proper groundwork so we know what exactly Spiritual Gifts are...

And, why God gives them to us in the first place!

You see, if we get this right...

And, if we’re able to understand and utilize our gifts...

It’s gonna unlock a lot of potential just lying dormant and bless this church and the community around us in unbelievable ways!

It reminds me of a classic *Peanuts* cartoon in which Lucy demands that her brother Linus change the TV channel – threatening him with her fist if he doesn’t.

***“What makes you think you can just walk in here and take over?”* Linus asks.**

“These five fingers,” Lucy replies.

“Individually they’re nothing. But, when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a weapon that’s terrible to behold.”

“Which channel do you want?” asks Linus.

Then, turning away, he looks at his own fingers and says, *“Why can’t you guys get organized like that?”*

Well, it’s a good question!

Not only for Linus’ fingers – but for us in the church!

You see, the key for greater ministry and mission begins – of course – with prayer.

Everything starts with prayer!

And then, once bathed in prayer, we can begin exploring where God has uniquely “gifted” us to be His Hands and His feet and His Voice and His Presence in the world around us...

Working together...

Doing things we never dreamed possible!

So, from the start we need to understand that the whole purpose of this series is about knowing exactly what Spiritual Gifts are...

Discerning where God has gifted you...

And, deciding to use your Gifts in service of Jesus Christ.

And, when you do that, I can promise you that not only will you bless the community around you...

But, you yourselves will be blessed as you live out the purpose for which God created you!

So, what exactly are Spiritual Gifts?

Well, one way we can define them, is this...

“Spiritual Gifts are unique manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers given for the building of the Body of Christ – which is the Church.”

Now, from this definition several things immediately stand out.

Most importantly, is that Spiritual Gifts are from God!

That may sound like I’m stating the obvious. But, first and foremost, we have to understand that whatever Gifts we possess are given to us by God.

They’re not innate to ourselves. In other words, they’re not something we create or develop on our own.

For example...

In terms of natural “physique,” my father and I are almost carbon copies of each other.

Well, I guess since he came first I’d be a copy of him. But, we’re built almost exactly the same!

We’re the same height. We’ve got the same long torso and shorter legs.

Of course, we’ve got the same large Irish head.

So, we’re very similar.

But, one place where we differ is that even though we’ve got the same frame, I’m actually somewhat bigger than my dad. I’ve got bigger shoulders and arms and legs than he does.

And, the reason is because I love sports and I've spent a lot of years working out – lifting weights and running. So, I've just developed in ways he hasn't.

Now, the key is that this is something "I" did myself.

But, Spiritual Gifts are not something we develop on our own!

We may refine them and grow more comfortable and mature in using them. But, they come from God! They originate completely with Him. And, He gives them to us according to His own will.

And, the thing about Spiritual Gifts is – everybody has 'em!

Everybody has at least one Spiritual Gift!

Likely we've got even more than one – some more dominant than others. But, we know for sure that everybody has at least one!

Everyone who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord is filled with the Holy Spirit at the moment of new birth! And, then the Spirit begins to develop something unique within each of us for service in the Kingdom of God!

The Scripture says, "*Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good*" (1 Corinthians 12:7)

Not just to some! But to "each one!"

In Ephesians 4:7, it says, "*But to each one of us grace* (the Greek word, charis – where we get our word for "gifts") *has been given as Christ apportioned it.*"

You may not know what your unique Gifts are. You may have never given it much thought or spent any time exploring or exercising your Gifts.

But, you have them!

The Scripture is unequivocal about that!

And, the Scriptures also tell us that as unique manifestations of the Spirit, your Gifts differ from other people's Gifts!

In other words, what God has given you is uniquely yours – or to be uniquely used in your own situation and circumstances.

For example...

I look around here at this congregation and the Gifts many of you possess stand right out. They're so clear to me!

We've got people here with Gifts for administration and leadership.

We've got people with Gifts for evangelism and outreach and faith.

I know there are folks here whose special Gift is generosity or maybe hospitality or encouragement.

And, we've got individuals with Gifts for wisdom and discernment.

You want to see some Gifts in action?

Just think of Pastor Ernie!

I mean, is there a person alive who's better at visitation than Ernie?

Ernie told me once that he went to the hospital to visit someone, but they'd already been discharged. So, you know what he did?

He went and "found" someone else to visit!

He found a complete stranger! Although I don't think Ernie's ever known a stranger in his life!

Now, just so you know, I like visitation too! It's part of my job and I think I do it fairly well. But, Ernie's specially gifted in that regard.

Of course, you might be thinking, "*C'mon! Is 'visitation' really a Spiritual Gift?*"

Well, here's where you've got to be careful and not get caught up in labels so much.

I don't know if there's a Spiritual Gift of "visitation" per se.

But, I know it's something Ernie does really well.

I know it comes naturally to him.

I know he blesses people by his presence.

And, I know he uses it for the Kingdom of God!

So, call it whatever you want – but it is most definitely a Gift!

You see, to quote well-known pastor and author, John Piper:

...we shouldn't get too lathered up about whether we can label our gifts or not. Spiritual gifts are not a limited and defined group of activities spelled out in the New Testament. Rather, spiritual gifts are any ability the Spirit gives you to express your faith in order to strengthen another person."

And, I think Piper's right!

We get so caught up in worrying about whether I have "this" gift or "that" -- instead of just using what God's given us without attaching a label to it.

Now, labels may be helpful if they lend a hand toward understanding what God's enabled us to do best. But, I don't think the Apostles or the early Christians or the Church Fathers worried excessively whether they had "this" gift or "that."

They just recognized there were things God called them to do...

Things they did really well because God equipped them...

Things that blessed a lot of people...

And, served to advance the Kingdom!

So, they did them!

In Acts 6, for instance, the Apostles knew their job was to preach and to teach the Word of God and that overseeing the community food pantry every day was cutting into what God had called and gifted them to do.

I mean, there're only so many hours in a day – right?

So, you know what they did?

They got the community to identify those with special “Gifts” of service to take over this ministry instead!

These were the first Deacons!

These Deacons took over the food pantry to the poor and did a great job at it!

People got fed.

Arguments died down.

And, you know what the Scriptures say happened after they got involved and began using their Gifts?

It says: *“So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7).*

The Church grew because people were using their Gifts!

Recently I was listening to Nancy Ortberg – wife of John Ortberg – pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California.

Nancy was preaching on Spiritual Gifts and she mentioned how as a young Christian woman she assumed her place of service in the church was helping in the nursery.

Reasonable assumption – right?

But, Nancy said, she hated working in the nursery, mainly because she really doesn't like kids all that much.

Now, she was saying that tongue-in-cheek, of course. But, it was clear that this is a woman whose gifts clearly weren't in nurturing.

Instead, she seemed to be pretty effective as a teacher and a preacher.

So, I asked Faith, "Can you imagine doing something like that yourself?

Did you ever want to preach?"

Faith said, no, not really.

And, that didn't surprise me!

But, then Faith said, "*What do you think my Gifts are?*"

Now, I know she's very talented musically. And, I tend to think what's inside her is more than just natural ability, but a unique enabling from God.

But, as I compared her to Nancy Ortberg I really thought Faith really is good at nurturing other people.

Now, is there a Spiritual Gift of "Nurture?"

I don't know – or if there is that you would call it that.

But, I know she cares deeply about other people's feelings and that people usually feel lifted in spirit when they're together.

And, I know I'm embarrassing her terribly at this moment!

So, call it what you will! But, if it's used for the glory of God, it's a Gift!

The point is, we all have different Spiritual Gifts!

It's not always necessary to attach a label to them. In fact, sometimes I wonder that folks who are so quick to affix labels really aren't copping out – in some sense.

What I mean, is that it's easy to say I feel I have Gifts in this area or that and never consider stepping outside our comfort zones under the pretext of saying, *"Well, that's just not my Gift."*

It well might not be!

But, you never know unless you try!

And, you're never going to know unless you start getting some feedback from other Christians around you.

Trust me! They'll let you know!

If you're a stickler for deadlines and details and things working out exactly as planned, you're probably not a good candidate for youth ministry!

Your Gifts are likely gonna be in other areas. And, you'll, find that out soon enough.

But, don't be afraid to try!

You might be surprised what you learn about yourself and where God's enabled you best!

You see, that's why Spiritual Gifts are "always" practiced within the context of community.

Now, by "community," of course, I mean the Church.

You see, the sole purpose of Spiritual Gifts...

The reason they exist...

Is for building up the Body of Christ – which again – in another description for the Church.

God doesn't give you Spiritual Gifts for your own amusement.

He gives you Gifts to bless others around you...

To strengthen the corporate Body of which we're all a part!

In Ephesians 4, it says this:

It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (v. 11-13).

So, Spiritual Gifts are never about individual honor and glory!

They're about corporate unity and maturity in the Faith.

They're about each of us doing our part – as God's enabled us best – for building up the Body of Christ!

You see, when you're exercising whatever Gifts God's given you, not only are you blessing others – but you're also inspiring them to use their own Gifts and be the best they can be themselves!

You're helping them grow in their own faith simply by growing in yours!

I can't tell you how many times I've felt tired or worn out and felt like just mailing it in -- and then I've remembered how hard the people in this church work!

And, your example...

The way you use your Gifts in faith...

Have inspired me!

They make me want to be better myself!

You see, as St. Irenaeus once put it: *"The glory of God is man fully alive."*

And, when I looked up that quote this week, some anonymous blogger captured it with this wonderful insight. He said...

Man is full alive when [his] physical and spiritual life are both in union with God's will – and that will is being put into action through serving others as Christ served us.

And, that's really the point of Spiritual Gifts!

They're all about glorifying God through the building up of the Church – the people God loves so much in Christ!

The late Mike Royko, a Pulitzer Prize winning columnist, once wrote about a conversation he had with his old pal, Slats Grobnik.

Now, Slats Grobnik was a fictional character Royko created and with whom he often used to discuss current events – generally in a neighborhood bar.

But, in one column he had Slats selling Christmas trees and telling about one young couple who came looking for a tree.

The guy was skinny with a big Adam's Apple, Slats recalls.

The girl was kind of pretty.

Both wore clothes from the bottom of the bin at the Salvation Army store.

Well, after only finding trees that were too expensive, they found a Scotch pine that was okay on one side, but pretty bare on the other.

Then, they picked up another tree that wasn't much better – full on one side – scraggly on the other.

She whispered something, and he asked if \$3 dollars would be okay.

Slats figured both trees wouldn't be sold, so he agreed.

A few days later Slats was walking down the street and he saw a beautiful tree in the couple's apartment.

It was thick and well-rounded.

He knocked on their door and they told him how they worked the two trees close together where the branches were thin. Then they tied the trunks together. The branches overlapped and formed a tree so thick you couldn't see the wire. Slats described it as "a tiny forest of its own."

"So that's the secret," Slats asserted.

"You take two trees that aren't perfect – that have flaws – that might even be homely – that maybe nobody else would want."

[And] "If you put them together just right, you can come up with something really beautiful."

Well, that really is the secret – isn't it?

Through the Holy Spirit, God gives us all certain Gifts.

He gives Gifts to you...

And, He gives Gifts to me.

And, when these Gifts are put together just right...

They become something really beautiful to see...

Because together they reflect the glory of God's Son, Jesus Christ...

And, they anticipate the wonder of what all of us -- one day -- will be like...

As we find ourselves in Him!

Amen.