

1 Peter: Spiritual Gifts

First of all we will look at spiritual gifts, which is something that came up at the end of last lecture, when we were looking at 1 Peter 4. This topic also came up when we looked at the book of James. We saw, toward the end of James, that James is conveying to us the idea that the healing of God is still available to this day. Therefore, it seemed right to spend a little time on spiritual gifts.

Just a few days ago I got a little insight into the way spiritual gifts work and do not work in the church. It was Wednesday night, and I was walking around looking for one of my children who had just finished with a youth group activity. I bumped into the pastor of children's ministries, who also oversees nursery programs, and he looked at me and he gave me a great big grin. He is the kind of man who likes to smile, but this smile was bigger than his usual grin, and he said to me, "Dan, I am so glad to see that you are in the nursery in about three Sundays." I said to him, "I am?" He smiled even bigger and said, "Why yes, you are. You and your whole family are in the nursery on the seventeenth." I said, "We are?" And then I said, "I remember that now. You have this program going where everybody in the whole church takes a turn in the nursery." He said, "That's right, and it's your turn in three weeks." Why was he so happy that I was in the nursery? I looked at him and said, "You look awfully happy that I am in the nursery. Why are you so happy that I am in the nursery?" He said something like this: "It just makes my heart glad to have this picture of a seminary professor in the nursery holding a crying baby and having to change a diaper. It just fills my heart with gladness." Why would it fill his heart with gladness? Because people think nursery duty is beneath them, of course, and if you have ever been the one trying to get people to volunteer to work in your church's nursery or to clean up after the church potluck dinner, you know that is about the last thing that most people want to do. If you listen long enough, you will find people giving the reason, and the reason is, "Nursery duty is not my spiritual gift." The problem with that is that nursery duty is not anybody's gift (or at least they don't think it's their gift), which just illustrates how the idea of spiritual gifts is something that can be easily turned to selfish usages. That of course, is not the purpose of the gifts or of teaching about the gifts.

Let me just ask you to turn back with me to that passage, 1 Peter chapter 4, in which Peter describes the functioning of the body of Christ and the need for the church to function in times of persecution by exercising gifts. Chapter 4, verse 12 says, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God maybe praised through Jesus Christ." 1 Peter 4, verses 10, 11, and maybe a tiny bit of verse 12, gives us a description of spiritual gifts divided into two parts. It says that each one should serve others, administer God's grace, speak the very words of God, serve with the strength God provides, all to the praise of Christ.

This passage is very brief. If you are interested in spiritual gifts, it is not one of the longer passages on spiritual gifts, by any means, but sometimes a shorter passage gives us good insight by providing a basic summary.

I have used the term "spiritual gifts" about six or seven times already. I imagine that many of you have used that phrase any number of times yourselves over the years. How would you feel if I told you that the phrase "spiritual gifts" never once appears in the entire Bible? It is true. The language of "spiritual gifts" is actually very diverse and very non-technical. It is common for us to read, for example, of "gifts." The Greek word is *charismata*. The Bible also talks about "work," "ministries," "workings," "manifestations of the spirit," and "spiritual things." At one point Paul even talks about "a measure of faith," as if you have to have faith to use them properly. The lists of the gifts also are fairly non-

technical. We have the one we looked at just now in 1 Peter 4, in addition to one in Ephesians 4, one in Romans 12, and one in 1 Corinthians 12. The gift lists all look different. Peter gives us a very simple way of dividing them up. There are two kinds: speaking and doing. There is another way of dividing them up, as well. Paul says some of them are greater than others; he says that we should desire the greater gifts. What makes a gift greater than others? A greater gift, we learn from 1 Peter, and also from 1 Corinthians 12:31, is simply a gift that serves more people. The goal of the gifts is to serve the people of God. That is why the little scenario where you have people saying, "I can't do that, because it is not my gift," is such a sad perversion of the doctrine of spiritual gifts. People use the concept to get out of service, when in fact the goal is to use them to lead us into more faithful service.

That reminds us of something else about the gifts. "Gifts," like gifts manifesting God's grace, are kind of a strange thing. In a way, a gift belongs to us. In another way, it does not belong to us. Especially with the moment of transaction—when you are being given something for your birthday or for Christmas or something—in a sense, there is a brief moment when that gift belongs to you, and yet, at the moment of transaction, you might say it still, for one last instant, belongs to the person who is handing it over to you. That might be a good way of thinking about gifts as well. There is something that is ours and it is not really or fully ours. It is not something just for our enjoyment, or for our pleasure. We receive something of God, but it is not a possession of ours; it is not a trophy. I hear people saying, "I have this gift," and "I have that gift," and "My gift mix is this" and "I have these five gifts over in this cluster," and it makes me wince, because it seems like they are not understanding that the purpose of gifts is not to give you a higher sense of identity or worth or significance, but rather to serve the church. The best thing we can do, as 1 Peter 4:10 says, is to be stewards of God's gifts. Receive it, take care of it. 1 Peter 4:11 says we should be good stewards, beautiful stewards of what God bequeaths to us.

What is a gift anyway? Let me give you a definition of what I mean. A gift, I will say, is "a capacity and a desire for ministry given by God for regular and fruitful use in the edification of the church and the extension of the kingdom."

By "capacity," I mean that there is an aptness for activity. We are ready. Those who are gifted to teach are apt to teach, and they edify people when they do so. Those who have the gift of leadership actually lead, and when they try to lead people follow, and it seems normal and right for them to be "taking over a project." In fact, it doesn't feel like they are taking over; it feels like that is just the way it is supposed to be, because they are good at this and they seem to know what they are doing. If somebody has the gift of encouragement and you spend a little time with them, after it is over you are actually encouraged. You feel better, even if you heard some bad news, or you heard that things will be difficult. Encouragers have the ability to say "no" with a smile and to say, "No, that won't work, but God loves you anyway, and something wonderful is going to happen," and you feel like it was a privilege to be told "no" by an encourager because they encourage. That is their gift.

So there is an aptness. That overlaps with the second idea: namely, when someone has a gift, there is fruit. You know, it is possible to be intelligent and well-trained and have a mastery of the English language (or whatever language you are speaking) and yet not bless the church. It is possible to be a wonderful musician and to have a wonderful voice, and yet not bless the church by your singing. How can that be? If the person who is articulate and intelligent and has mastered the language uses the language to put down others, to exalt himself, to foster divisions, to put himself over others, to promote false doctrines, that will not help the church. Even somebody who sings a good hymn, and sings it well, can completely fail to edify the church. If, for example, the singing is done in a certain manner or style that the attention is drawn all to themselves.

I'll give you an example. Here in the United States, there are some churches that are happy to applaud for people who sing and other churches that do not applaud, and there are churches that are in-between that do not unusually applaud, except maybe when the children are doing something, like the children's musical program at Christmas and Easter. Then everybody claps for the children because they are just so cute and you want to encourage them. You know it is not going to make them proud or self-centered. In some of these churches—the ones that usually don't applaud, but once in a while they do—you almost get the feeling sometimes that some people are looking for the applause. They do everything they can to get the applause. When they get the applause, you say "That is right, that is what you wanted. You wanted to put on a show and you did, but whether the church is edified is another question." It is possible to be talented and not actually fulfill the goal of your gift, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14, to strengthen and encourage the church. It is possible to be talented and not prepare God's people for gifts of service, so that the body might be built up to unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son.

Another thing about gifts is that there is ordinarily a desire. There is a pleasure in exercising a spiritual gift. Now this is not absolute: you may have a gift and occasionally be miserable in the exercise of your gift. How could you justly be miserable when edifying the church in exercising a gift? The clearest example we can think of is when you have to confront sin. We could think for example of Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, as well as a contemporary pastor. They are called to give words of judgment to the people of God, and they do not want to say them. They do not want to give their message, but they cannot hold it back. They have the gift. They have the word from God, and they are grieving. They are not happy. Even today, of course, someone who has a responsibility to teach and has to confront sin may be deeply wounded by the need to confront sin. One can think of other cases like that, but ordinarily there is a delight in the use of a gift. For example, Romans 12:8 says of those who give, that they should give "with simplicity." That little word "with simplicity" means that you give and it is just a gift, that is all. You just give, and it is simple in that you do not want or expect or need anything back. In fact, you even somehow manage to convey, "Here is something for you, and I do not want or demand or need anything back. Here is a gift." That is giving with simplicity. That is to say, they take pleasure in simply giving.

Maybe I will speak from personal experience just at tiny bit. I like to tell people, "When I go do a conference I do the teaching part for free. What you pay me for is to fly on the plane, pick up my luggage, pack, sleep on a lumpy bed, and so forth. That is what you pay me for." Teachers will often say, "I teach for free; you are paying me to grade the papers." A minister might say, "I preach for free; you are paying me to try to get the janitor to do his job or to try to get the deacons to do what they should be doing." A choir member might say, "I love to sing; I don't like to travel to choir, but I love to sing in the choir." What they are all saying is, "This is my delight. This is my pleasure." That is the way it should be when you are exercising a gift. You should have a desire, a love, a gladness in the exercise of these gifts. All of this happens to advance God's kingdom, not just His church. I have been using church examples so far, but the gifts are not just for the church; they are also to advance all of God's work throughout the world.

I will put it to you this way: by bequeathing spiritual gifts upon His church, God is decentralizing the leadership of the church. The leadership of the church does not fall in the hands of one or two or three people, but it is in the hands of all of the people—showing more clearly that it is God's church, not the pastor's church or the elders' church or anyone else's church. Another way of saying this would be: when God gives gifts to people all over the church, He is making the church more theocentric as opposed to anthropocentric. That is to say, we look at what God has given and we say, "Behold what God has bequeathed upon His church. See how He is equipping His church," instead of looking at one or two or three people who have a high profile and get a lot of praise. Gifts, properly recognized, decentralize and spread out the praise.

Sometimes people get the idea that gifts are very hard and concrete, but I do not believe that. I believe there is a certain fluidity to the gifts. For one thing, none of the lists are identical, which suggests to me that we do not have a rigid set of categories. Peter divides them into just two: you are either gifted to do or to talk. Then there are other things we tend to list, like hospitality or skill in art and music, or perhaps skill in preaching, and these do not seem to fit exactly on any gift lists. So the gifts do not fall into rigid categories.

Along the same lines, I would like to suggest a sort of threefold division of the way we should think about this: function, role, and office. It is one thing to function with regard to a certain gift, and then you can have a role, or you can have an office. If you are wondering about your possession or your use of God's *charismata* to you, it is important to recognize—coming back to my opening illustration about the nursery—that every Christian should participate in almost every gift.

Some of the gifts that come up in 1 Corinthians 12 include administration, discernment, and faith. You also have teaching and healing. In Romans, we have other gifts, such as service and shepherding or leading, giving, hospitality (Romans 12:13, I take it that way), and encouragement. It is fairly easy to see that with regards to most of these gifts, every Christian should do them at least some of the time. Let us take a few examples, like discernment. There is a gift to discernment. A person with the gift of discernment might have an ability to read people. You might recognize things about people a little bit faster than others, like an intuition about somebody who is hypocritical. A person with the gift of discernment cannot only have that sense that there is something wrong with the sermon or book, but can search out what that is. That person might be way ahead of the rest of us in detecting something that is amiss or in seeing the true path. However, isn't it also true that every Christian should exercise discernment? Shouldn't we all test the spirits? Shouldn't we all test the teaching that we receive? In fact, we are commanded to do so, for example in I Thessalonians 5:20.

How about encouragement? Encouragement is a spiritual gift mentioned in Romans 12:8. Should we all be encouragers? What does Hebrews say? "Encourage one another daily as long as is called today," which means then that every Christian should participate in the gift of encouragement. How about evangelism? Evangelism is a gift, but shouldn't we all be ready to give a reason for the faith that is in us? Shouldn't we all be witnesses to Christ?

Let me pick just one more. Did you know faith is on the gift list? People with the gift of faith will keep on trusting God when everything looks dark. They will take a great risk with confidence, because they are just sure God is in it, even though maybe the odds don't look very good. They have the ability to rest in God and to go to bed at night instead of staying up till 4 or 5 a.m. trying to work everything out. They say, "If the Lord wants to bless it, He will bless it." Maybe those are some signs that you have the faith. I do not think I have that gift, but those are maybe some signs of the gift of faith. Certainly we should all have faith, and so I want to say to you that as you think about spiritual gifts, we all ought to be willing to function in every category. We all ought to be willing to administer and discern and encourage and to share our faith in Christ and to exercise faith, to shepherd, to teach, to lead, to show hospitality, and to give gifts. Everybody should be willing to do all of these things.

In addition, some people become good at something. You may have the experience I had once in my life: somebody asked me to do something and I did it and they said, "You know, you were good at that. I had no idea," and I said, "I had no idea either, but I think you are right. I think I was kind of good at that." What that means when that happens is that it might be time for you to do that thing again and maybe do it repeatedly, maybe grow in that skill, maybe approach somebody who could be a mentor or a

guide to you in developing or honing something God has given you. Then, if you do it not only semi-regularly, but very regularly, you might enter into the office. We think especially of offices like elder and deacon, and that includes maybe being a teacher and so on, but there are others. Someone might have the gift of service, which is another gift on the list, and that person might be in charge of the food budget or the food pantry or the mercy ministry of the church, even though that man or woman has no ordained office in the church. This is what I mean by the distinction of function, role, and office. We all function in these capacities, many of us should be willing to operate in the role from time to time, and then if you have a clear capacity and a calling from God, that role becomes an office and you exercise your gift in office. That is one way of looking at it.

One way of dividing up the gifts is to look at the basic categories of speaking gifts and doing gifts. Then you can divide them up between public and private, and also you can divide them up between more natural and more supernatural. I am going to explain that in a minute. The public gifts would be teaching, which is natural, and in the past we had apostleship, which was more supernatural. Something that is very private, yet is still a speaking gift, would be encouragement, which is natural, rather than tongues, which is more supernatural. Some gifts are more obviously supernatural and some are seemingly more an extension of a person's natural gifts. We would say that something like teaching looks more like an extension of natural gifts, because maybe a person is smart and articulate and studies hard and is diligent. So you can say, "Well, it makes sense that someone who works hard and was a good student even in the third grade would now be a teacher." On the other hand, the gift of tongues is very private and supernatural. You do not speak in tongues because you were smart in third grade or because you studied for five hours and you were diligent in your preparation. Apostleship would be public but also very supernatural; the apostles were called to that by God. Some gifts are in the middle: evangelism, knowledge and wisdom can be public or private. Shepherding would be a little on the private side perhaps, and more natural. Prophecy, interpretation, and distinguishing spirits are all highly supernatural.

In addition to speaking gifts, there are doing gifts. We can also divide them up as public or private and more supernatural. All the gifts are supernatural, but I am referring to the distinction between things that are obviously supernatural and things that are more natural—using ordinary means like preparation and so on. The public gifts here would be things like administration and leadership, while the private doing gifts are giving and hospitality and perhaps creativity and ministries of mercy. A doing gift that is more supernatural would be, for the apostles and prophets, the gift of miracles. That is very obviously highly supernatural, and then there seems to be a separate gift, perhaps, of healing, which is also highly supernatural. On the more natural side, we would place administration and giving, both of which require planning.

What I would like to suggest to you is that, instead of having one and only one gift, or having any number of separate gifts stacked on top of one another, we operate maybe in quadrants. You might be a doer and a private person, but you still like to plan things. So you might move around between the gift of giving and gift of mercy and gift of hospitality. You might have a tendency to do all three of those and to shift from one to the other as your life changes. Another person might be over more in the public realm, and that person might administer and lead as the needs arise. Administration is more organizing, while leadership is more visionary, getting people to join in with you. One person might move back and forth between those different gifts.

When we think about our spiritual gifts, they are not a stagnant thing. I think God tends to give us an orientation on these three scales: public or private, more natural or more supernatural, and more speaking or more doing. Within that natural orientation God gives us, I think we can move around.

I was a pastor for five years and I really had to do everything. I had to do the function, and to some extent the role, of all the gifts at least slightly. When I became a college professor, I became far less devoted to personal evangelism. That was pretty much a thing of the past. I spoke, but I did not do it personally, so that kind of disappeared to some extent, and my shepherding of course dropped off as well. When I was teaching college, and when I began to teach Greek here at the seminary, I moved away from the big picture to the little picture and I focused very strongly in college and here on the gift of teaching. I honed that as best I could. About three years ago, I became the Dean here, and I never would have claimed the gift of administration. I never use the word “I” and the word “administrator” in the same sentence without quotation marks. I function and I exercise the role. If you ask me, as Dean, what spiritual gift am I exercising, I would say that I do not have the gift of administration. Whatever I do that works out is still making use of my nature as a teacher, but the way I lead is by teaching and presenting ideas. That is the way I see it, so I see it as staying vaguely within the same cluster. I am still always in the arena of public, speaking gifts, but I move around within that. That is also the way it would be with most of you. If you look for your gifts, do not look for some static category. You have a sort of area of God’s blessing—everybody does—but you are willing to move around in that area, and do things you do not really like all that much or things that would not have been your first choice, if you have been called upon to do them and the church or the kingdom seems to need them. That is my idea.

Leadership is not the same thing as an office. There are many kinds of leadership. I would like to distinguish between three things: influence, authority, and power. I am going to use the word “power” here with a little bit of negative connotation. Some people think that when you have the office and you are a leader, then you have power. Then you can make all the decisions. Then you can get things done your own way at last. That is really a misconception of the way we should think about this whole topic. Instead, we should recognize that everybody can have influence. Even if you are a brand-new Christian, even if you are very young, even if you have no standing anywhere, you can have influence, because the truth always has its way. A lot of you here probably have children. If you have children, you have been rebuked by your children. I imagine that some of you have heard a child say something like, “Daddy, you shouldn’t be sad. God will take care of it.” Then we have to say, “That is true, honey, God will. Thank you for reminding me, because I was too sad.” Children recognize that Mommy or Daddy was more sad than they should have been, and so they encourage. When that happens, we need to say, “Honey, you are right. You have taught me today.” Even a child—anybody who is willing to work and has some knowledge and knows how to use it the right time—can have influence. You can influence anybody who is over you if you have knowledge that they need. If you are willing to work faithfully, reliably, and cheerfully without a lot of oversight, you will have influence. You will be a leader; I like to call this “a leader from below.” You do not have any recognition, but you are still a leader. People will start to look to you and depend on you and so forth.

Authority is perhaps the ideal, where you have a blend of this. You have the ability to work and the ability to use knowledge and skills of one kind or another, and you have some recognition. You have been called upon to exercise a role. You have done well. People say, “You did that well; would you please do it again?” Or you may even have an office, maybe as an elder or a deacon or a coordinator of youth activities or something else. Authority is when you have the office or the recognition and the skill and the experience and the giftedness. The error is when you take this selfishly and grasp for power for your own ends and your own recognition.