

#62 “What Is My Spiritual Gift?”

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1 Corinthians 12:4-7 says, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." There is an obvious, intentional contrast that is set up in these verses. First, we must note that God is the same, the same Spirit is behind the giving of gifts, and the same God is the One Who enables the using of the gifts. The theme is thus sameness and unity because it is the same God working out His one plan of ministry corporately through the body of Christ. We each get to play a part because the same God indwells us all, and as we are faithful to honor Christ with our gifts, all benefit. The purpose of using gifts is thus for the work of the Spirit to be effected in the lives of the corporate body of Christ. We need to be taught, we need to be served, we need to be shown mercy, we need to be loved, we need to be exhorted, we need to be led, we need hospitality, and so on. As each believer uses his or her own God given gifts, others benefit, God is glorified, and the one through whom the Spirit is working is moved to awe as he or she sees God do what only God can do. But what I want us to focus on is the series of phrases that describe the nature of gifts. Paul says that there are *varieties of gifts, varieties of ministries, and varieties of effects*. Given that each word has its own distinct meaning, I think he is trying to convey the idea that gifts are very much individual and crafted based upon how God has created each of us and how He intends to use us. There are varieties of gifts, each of which has a variety of ways it can be used to minister to others, and each particular incidence of ministry has a special way that God wants to effect His power and change in somebody else's life. Gifts are thus greatly different, very personal, and very much given and developed by God's grace as we walk in faith according to His will for our lives.

The Bible lists out several examples of spiritual gifts such as leading, exhorting, faith, wisdom, knowledge, teaching, and many more (see Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4:7-16). Some total these to be in the teens while others come up with twenty or more. Some of the gifts I believe have generally passed away such as miracles, healing, and prophecy. These were very important in the early church because the written Word was not yet complete. This is how the Spirit of God taught the church, led the church, confirmed His presence and power in the church, and edified the church. Now we have the Word as the ultimate edifying means and evidence of God's power having worked and still being at work. So the bottom line is that the Bible does give us some semblance of a list of gifts that we can draw from, but to simply categorize ourselves as having one or more gifts (and all of us have at least one gift- Romans 12:6) is not necessarily all that helpful. Perhaps you have seen a spiritual gifts test or inventory. It is a series of questions which, based on how they are answered, indicates what our gifting might be. I have taken such a test and found that, according to this man-made test, I have

"minimal" gifting in several areas and a "significant" gifting in a couple others. Did this help me in anyway as far as knowing how to serve the Lord? Not really, particularly since my answers were largely affected by how I had served in the church prior to taking the test. Plus, if my gift was discernment, there is not exactly a position or office of discernment in the church. So where do I go to serve? Furthermore, all Christians should have wisdom, knowledge, and discernment, so how do I know these are actually gifts and not just evidence of the Spirit's work in my life as a believer?

I don't believe it is wrong to take such a test, but I believe that it has serious limitations. First, it doesn't account for the varieties of ministries and effects which Paul spoke of. It merely gives a set number of categories when in reality gifts can be used in more ways than we can probably count. Teaching, for example, can be done so many different ways and in so many different contexts (e.g. children's ministry, pulpit ministry, seminary, counseling, small group teaching, adult Sunday School, evangelism, evangelism training, teaching one's own kids about the Lord, teaching those with special needs, etc.). Thus, just believing that a person has a gift of teaching does not really help them in terms of finding a place to serve in the church. There is so much more to it than that, given that some are better at preaching while others are better at counseling and so on. So even if a spiritual gifts test narrowed the list down to one or two gifts, the work has really only just begun. Second, I believe that the test merely outputs what we want it to based upon what we already believe about ourselves. This is significant in that we might get it wrong if we believe that our gifts necessarily line up with our natural proficiencies, our comfort zones, our previous experiences, our preferences, or our professional roles. Thus, I believe that spiritual gifts are not found best by taking a written test, but by other means, means much more typical to how God desires to lead His people.

So, here is what I think we must do. First, we should pray that God would refine us so that we could see where He delights in using us to serve the church. Second, we should be willing to serve even in areas where we don't necessarily feel we are gifted, particularly if the church needs help in those areas. What might happen is that the Spirit will prompt us that this is not our best fit and that there is something else for us to do, in which case He will begin placing a burden on our hearts for that other ministry. Then again, we just might see God do something we didn't expect and find that we have gifts we never knew we had. Thirdly, we must be extremely patient as it takes time for God to refine us so that we are useable. He may need to show us that we are placing too much confidence in our natural abilities rather than trusting in Him to do things by the power of the Spirit rather than by our own flesh. As we cast ourselves upon Him, we might find ourselves serving in a way that we would never have expected. So, fourthly, we shouldn't expect our gifts to necessarily align with what we feel are our natural abilities or comfort zones. Fifthly, if we believe that we have a gift in a certain area, we must cultivate it as God leads. This will allow God to confirm in our hearts and possibly through other believers as they see God use us that we are headed in the right direction. It can also make it clear if we are not going the right way. If we let our gifts remain dormant, we will likely become very spiritually stagnant through and through. Gifts are given to be used for the common good, not to be ignored, undiscovered, or wasted.

So, in summary, gifts are found as we humble ourselves before God to do what He wants us to do and to serve His people in His church. As we do this, He will expose our gifts, and we can trust Him to open the door to use our gifts. Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." As we follow God's leading in obedience in our lives, He will prepare us, grace us with His gifts, and give us opportunity to use them. We don't need to fret over knowing our gift mix immediately. Rather, we need to set ourselves toward serving God where we can, as He leads us, and as He enables us. The gift discovery will take care of itself as we walk with God and serve Him.