

# GOOD STEWARDS OF GOD'S GIFTS

*SERIES: "NOW CONCERNING SPIRITUAL GIFTS...."*

**by Ron Ritchie**

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When I was thirty-one years old, I had already been a Christian for ten years, and had experienced the privilege of serving the Lord Jesus in a variety of Christian ministries in the community and in a number of different churches. I was in my second year of a four-year master's program at seminary. In the fall of that year I approached my mentor with a very serious question. "Prof," I said, "when I finish my training, what exactly will I become---a pastor, a professor, a scholar, a preacher, a Biblical researcher, a writer....?" I will never forget his answer.

"Ron, the answer to your question will be determined by the spiritual gifts the Lord Jesus gave you at the time of your conversion." He then asked me a most profound question: "What are your spiritual gifts?"

I immediately replied, "Well I can sing, I love to paint in oil, and I have a lot of fun in theater."

My patient mentor replied, "No Ron, I'm not speaking of natural talents, which were given by a gracious God to all mankind to appeal to man's soul. What I'm speaking of are the spiritual gifts that are given to every new believer in Christ to minister to mankind in the area of the spirit."

I just stood there dumbfounded. Over those ten years that I had been a Christian, with a variety of wonderful teachers, mentors, and ministries, no one that I could recall had taught me about spiritual gifts! No one had taught me how spiritual gifts related to the individual Christian, the other members of the body of Christ, or the world around me.

Over the years I have discovered that I was not the only Christian with that particular large hole left in my basic theology. This lack of understanding has been a problem over the centuries for many Christians. Listen to this recent quote:

Most Christians have no idea what their spiritual gifts are, according to a nationwide survey by Barma Research Group. Although 88% of born-again Christians have heard of spiritual gifts, only 39% can identify a spiritual gift they believe they possess. "A small proportion of adults are actively seeking to minister in ways which capitalize upon their giftedness...." (1)

In this message we're beginning a series on spiritual gifts. The series title, "Now concerning spiritual gifts," is a quote from a letter from the apostle Paul to the Corinthian Christians (1 Corinthians 12:1), who were also somewhat confused about spiritual gifts and their proper expression, both within the body of Christ and in the Jewish, Greek, and Roman world around them.

Note: 1. *National & International Religious Report*, Oct. 16, 1995, Vol. 9, No. 22, p. 4.

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## **Good stewards of God's gifts**

1 Peter 4:10:

As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. [NAS]

In 33 AD thousands of Jews from around the Roman world went up to Jerusalem to attend the feast of Pentecost. During that feast the Lord God sent the Holy Spirit upon his disciples, who in turn began to witness to their fellow Jews. Many of those Jews became followers of Jesus Christ as their Messiah and then returned to their homes after the feast. Some who returned home as Christians lived in what we now call the western coast of Turkey (Asia Minor). There they continued to share the good news that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Family members and friends began to come into the Christian faith, and home churches began to spring up everywhere.

Some thirty years later, Peter, who was living in the city of Rome, wrote this letter of encouragement and warning to the communities in this same region. In 64 AD the Roman Empire was ruled by Nero, and the Roman people were ruled by pagan gods and goddesses, fear, and superstition. During this season Nero began to politically and socially persecute the Christian communities around the Roman world, and the believers in Asia Minor were not spared. In Peter's letter to those suffering believers, he reminded them that their now risen Lord Jesus had suffered unjustly at the hand of Rome during his time on earth (see 1 Peter 2:21-24), and that he would be with them now in the midst of their unjust suffering.

In 1 Peter 4:7-9 the apostle reminded his spiritual children that times were going to become very difficult for them if they continued to proclaim Jesus as their Lord and Savior. However, even as the political and social scene was becoming darker, Peter called them to take the high road in their relationships with one another as well as their relationships with the pagan communities around them: "The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer. Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint." Or as Eugene Peterson wrote in his paraphrase *The Message*, "Everything in the world is about to be wrapped up, so take nothing for granted. Stay wide-awake in prayer. Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything. Be quick to give a meal to the hungry, a bed to the homeless---cheerfully" (p. 492).

Then Peter encouraged the suffering Christian community, "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." In this short verse we learn seven wonderful truths about spiritual gifts.

1. "As each one...." This refers to those who made up the larger Christian community that Peter was writing to---Jews and Gentiles who had proclaimed Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. Once they declared their faith in Jesus (see Romans 10:9-10), they became new creatures in Christ and were spiritually baptized into---identified with or placed into---the body of Christ. Paul defined the mystical body of Christ to the Galatians when he wrote, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28). The body of Christ refers to the whole company of "called out ones" since the first Christian Pentecost in 33 AD.

Paul began to give a clearer definition of the body of Christ when he wrote to the Roman Christians about their spiritual gifts: "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12:4-5). He continued to use the analogy of the body of Christ in his writings to the Corinthian Christians (1 Corinthians 12-14). He also taught this spiritual truth to the Ephesians when he wrote of the new oneness that would come to the Christian Jews and Gentiles: "In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 3:4-6). So the mystical body of Christ is made up of many members, and each member is very important to the other members.

2. "As each one has received...." Note the past tense. At the moment a believer places their faith in Jesus Christ and is baptized into the mystical body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:13), God sends his Holy Spirit to reside in them, and then, according to Paul, "...To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit [spiritual gifts] for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). The particular gifts we receive are not a result of any choice

we make, but as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit...But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills" (1 Corinthians 12:4, 11).

3. "As each one has received a special gift...." The word gift in Greek is charisma. It means a gift of grace or a God-given ability for service. When God in his grace sends His Holy Spirit to reside in a new believer, the Holy Spirit gives them their permanent spiritual gifts (see 1 Corinthians 12:4-11). These spiritual gifts are exactly that: gifts. No one can work for them, desire them, or deserve them. They are gifts given because of the grace of God; and once given, they are to be opened, investigated, and developed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual gifts are not natural talents. All of mankind in every generation since the beginning of our existence has been given natural talents in art, music, building, math, sports, etc., in order to bring grace and beauty to the world in which we all live. Natural talents enrich the soul of mankind. Spiritual gifts enrich the spirit of fellow believers, and bring blessings or conviction of sin to unbelievers, with the hope that they will repent of their rejection of Jesus Christ as their Lord and turn to him as their Savior.

When this spiritual truth becomes our current reality, we will see not only the importance of discovering our spiritual gifts, but the importance of wrapping our lives around them so that we can put them to their proper use within the church for the glory of God and the benefit of others. We will also discover that within the body of Christ, every member has a significant role for the welfare of the whole body.

A friend of mine wrote a piece entitled *Unopened Gifts* :

How come you've left so many gifts unopened on the floor? They have your name on them, they belong to you, they are yours for the taking--if only you will receive them. What is that you say? That they can't be yours, you have your share already. They must be someone else's. There must be some mistake? You're afraid of what so-and-so will say when they see you unwrapping that gift--you fear their reaction, their envy. Go on open up your package, see what is inside your gift box. You'll be amazed at how I knew exactly what to give you--the perfect fit for you right now---in fact, just what you've always wanted, but you didn't even know it. Go on open it! You can trust me. I am the master gift-giver. I never make mistakes, or give the wrong size, or color, or fit. But, please do hurry and open it, to enjoy it and to share it with others, so they can benefit from your gift too. That's my whole purpose for giving gifts...not for you to put them back in the box, to keep them safe, or even put them in a glass cabinet, to look at and admire. No, all my gifts are for my children to use, to help their brothers and sisters, not to make anyone else jealous or feel less fortunate. As I said, I see a number of unopened packages, gift wrapped especially for you. They are yours. I'm right here, waiting, longing to see you unwrap them, and to see the look of joy and wonder on your face. (Rosalind Renshaw, 10/2/91.)

The way to receive spiritual gifts was demonstrated to me by my five-year-old grandson René last Christmas morning. I walked in and handed him a square package. He was anticipating something wonderful from "Papa." He didn't say, "I don't know if I need that," or, "I probably already have one of those," or, "How come it isn't bigger?" or, "Is that all you're going to give me?" He looked down at the package and said, "Thank you, Papa!" Then he tore off the paper. "Oh! It's just what I wanted!..."

4. "As each one has received a special gift, employ it...." Spiritual gifts, or graces, are God-given abilities or channels for the love and power of our risen Lord to flow out through us to the spiritual needs of the members of the body of Christ, to help in their spiritual maturity, as well as to bring blessings or conviction to non-Christians.

A major problem in the church of Jesus Christ today is that although our Lord by his Holy Spirit has given each new believer their spiritual gifts, many refuse to open them up, or even if they do discover them, they refuse to express them or let others know how they could benefit the body of Christ. The tragic result of this passive view of gifts is that believers become isolated from each other. The church then ends up with a small

minority of doers and a large majority of viewers. Further, if we and the other church members and staff don't know our spiritual gifts, the sad result is that we end up trying to minister the love and grace of Christ in areas in which we are not equipped to do so. This spiritual ignorance also stimulates jealousy, fear, anger, competition, and pride, causing great harm and confusion among the members of the body of Christ, and wonderment in the minds of the nonbelievers watching the confusion from a safe distance (see Ephesians 4:14-16, 1 Corinthians 14). So find your spiritual gifts and employ them!

5. "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another...." Spiritual gifts are given to serve others, not ourselves. The apostle Paul told the Corinthian believers that the Trinity was involved with spiritual gifts. He wrote, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:4). This means that the Holy Spirit has a variety of ways he wants to express the love and grace of our risen Lord Jesus to the members of the body of Christ. There are also varieties of ministries, and our same risen Lord and Savior continues to create new ministries for his disciples to express his love and grace in each new generation. "And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons" (12:6). God the Father is not boring. We can put on the same program night after night, and each time God the Father will bring forth a whole different set of effects from the same message of love through his children. When the members of the Christian community get hold of this reality, they begin to minister standing on tiptoe with excitement and wonder, resulting in hearts full of praise to God and his awesome ways. And finally, "...To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (12:7).

6. "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards...." Peter reminded his spiritual children that, having received these spiritual gifts, they were now responsible to God to open them up, begin to use them in the proper way, mature in them, and wrap their lives around them. To be a steward in this context means to become a faithful manager of God's property. He has not only entrusted us with a ministry within the body of Christ on his behalf, but he has also equipped us with gifts to work out that ministry. We are accountable before him to become good stewards of our new life in him, our spiritual gifts, our time, and our ministries.

7. "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God." Peter then summed up his encouragement to that suffering community of believers by reminding them to be good stewards of the multi-faceted and magnificent ways in which God's grace is expressed to his spiritual children. God had offered by his grace (unmerited favor) the gift of salvation, the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, their place in the body of Christ, their spiritual gifts, and their various ministries within the body of Christ and in the pagan communities around them. In spite of the difficult persecution they were under, they were encouraged not to focus on their political, social, and emotional suffering, but on the wonderful spiritual gifts they had been given to be used in the midst of their suffering.

The November 13, 1995 issue of *Christianity Today* featured the article "Fifty Years with Billy Graham" by William Martin (pp. 18-29). This wonderful article described the man, who is now seventy-seven years old, his fifty years of ministry, his fifty-two-year relationship with his wife Ruth Graham Bell, and his relationships with his family. He has four adult children and nineteen grandchildren. The article went on to talk about his special friends, his struggles, his mistakes, and his spiritual impact on this world as a man, husband, father, friend, and evangelist over the last five decades.

In reading the article I became overwhelmed by this one man's faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ, his clear understanding of his spiritual gift of evangelism, and how, because of his understanding of his gift, he was able to have a clear focus about who he was and how God wanted to use him. And use him God has, to his glory and to Billy Graham's amazement. William Martin concluded his article by saying that other men and women will appear on the scene to take Billy Graham's place in a whole new generation, after he goes into the presence of the Lord he has sought to serve all his adult life. "But unless and until that happens, Billy Graham has to be regarded as the best who ever lived at what he does." He is, as Scripture says, "a workman who does not need to be ashamed." He has been a good steward of his life, spiritual gifts, and open doors of ministry.

Now concerning spiritual gifts, we are called to not only become good stewards of the manifold grace of God, but also to use our spiritual gifts by the strength of God and to his glory.

## To the glory of God

1 Peter 4:11:

Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. [NAS]

We need to keep in mind that the apostles had already taught the subject of spiritual gifts to the new churches. When the apostles mentioned them in their letters, they would present only a partial list of gifts, because they were using them as illustrations to support teaching on deeper problems. For example, Paul wrote to the Romans addressing the need for sound judgment in their new life in the Lord, and in that context he wrote about the use of their spiritual gifts (see Romans 12:1-8). In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he was addressing the need to preserve the unity of the Spirit (see Ephesians 4:1-16), and in 1 Corinthians he was addressing the problem of competition (see 1 Corinthians 12-14).

When we place Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28; and Ephesians 4:11 into a harmony, we discover that the apostle Paul lists twenty different spiritual gifts that each fall into either of two categories: speaking gifts and serving gifts.

Speaking gifts are to be used to speak the word of God. There are eleven speaking gifts: apostleship, prophecy, evangelism, pastoring/teaching, encouragement, leadership, word of wisdom, word of knowledge, teaching, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. The apostle encouraged his spiritual children who had speaking gifts to use them as the very words of God spoken through them. When godly men and women are led by the Spirit of God to speak the word of God, they always depend on the power of God.

There are nine serving gifts to be used in the strength of God: faith (or vision), healing, miraculous powers, service, discerning of spirits, helps, administration, giving, and mercy. Spiritual men and women are to express these gifts not in their own power and personality, but "in the strength God supplies." Paul declared to the Christians in the church of Philippi, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Peter reminded the Jews who were standing around amazed that he had healed a lame man, "Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk?" (Acts 3:12).

All the spiritual gifts, whether speaking or serving gifts, are to be expressed in such a way that Jesus can bring praise to his Father, because he is worthy of glory and power. The children of God are given spiritual gifts not so that they can receive the honor and glory, but so that when they use these gifts in the power of the Spirit, the living Lord Jesus Christ will be seen in them, and honor will be brought to God the Father. In the incident in Acts that I just mentioned, when Peter and John met the lame man at the gate to the temple in Jerusalem, that man placed his faith in the risen Jesus as his Messiah and was immediately healed. "And with a leap, he stood upright and began to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God"---not praising Peter and John (Acts 3:8)!

Out of my conversation with my professor and mentor back in 1965, I was challenged to write my master's thesis, which I did over the next two years, on the topic, "A Proposed Program for the Development of Spiritual Gifts in a Local Church." I received only a B+ for it, but I want you to know that I have been growing in that wonderful truth ever since. A few years ago I was able to visit my old seminary with a few friends. I went up to the third floor of the new library and found my old but still relevant manuscript. As I held that document in my hands, my thoughts were filled with many memories of the lessons I had learned during those two years and the years to follow. My heart was also filled with gratefulness to God that my old prof had taken the time to challenge me so long ago to find my spiritual gifts and "wrap my life around them." This I have sought to do, not only for myself but also to try to help my brothers and sisters in the church of Jesus Christ to do the same thing. It is a most fulfilling life, because you are filled with a new sense of spiritual worth as you come to realize that your gifts are of great value to the spiritual welfare of the members of the body of Christ and the people in your community.

In order to develop our understanding of the subject of spiritual gifts, we need to personally discover the answers to seven basic questions. I hope we can help answer these questions within this series:

1. Where are the spiritual gifts listed in the word of God?
  2. What are their biblical definitions?
  3. Where do they "fit" within the body of Christ?
  4. How can I discover my own spiritual gift(s)?
  5. When can I begin to wrap my life around my gift(s) and express them within the body of Christ and in the world around me?
  6. How can I know the spiritual gifts of my brothers and sisters?
  7. How can I help my brothers and sisters find their gifts?
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Ron Ritchie  
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