

## 1 Cor 12:1-11 Gifts of the Spirit

Last week, I received a call from someone from a previous parish. We caught up on respective family happenings and activities, and then he said to me, 'If you came here now, you'd never believe what I'm doing!' It was exciting to listen to how God had called him to new areas of service in his church, and had equipped him to do it.

When I was there, he was very much involved in caring for his invalid mother. He lived with her and looked after her, and faithfully brought her to church each week that she was well enough to go. She passed away a year or so after I left, and then in time, God opened up new avenues for him to explore. He was now not only on Parish Council, but was involved in leading worship and preaching. In fact, he'd become one of the key leaders in his parish. He was energised and excited by the way God was using him, and expressed surprise that things could have changed so much for him in a few short years.

One of the things I've learned as I've served the Lord is that the place he calls us to in life is not set in concrete. It can change as we change, and it can change as our circumstances change - but it is always in keeping with the gifts he has given us and the person he has made us to be. However, sometimes that may need a little unpacking, and like my friend, we may discover that we have hidden talents!

Let's look at the passage today from 1 Corinthians 12 - a very well-known passage about the gifts that God gives his Church. I trust that as we unpack it a little, it may spark for us some new possibilities in our service for God.

By way of backgrounds, we know that Paul initially wrote what he did about the gifts to correct some inappropriate behaviour in the Corinthian Church. They were rich in spiritual gifts, but the gifts were being abused. Those gifts which were more supernatural in nature were being revered and given a higher place than the other less obvious gifts. Because of this, some were coveting the gifts of others above the gifts God had given them. Some were speaking out of place in the meetings, and others were speaking unintelligibly, being of no use whatsoever to the rest of the group.

Paul wrote to correct this situation. However, in the process of his correction, we learn a lot about the spiritual gifts for our own situation.

1. For instance, we learn that among the gifts God gives, there are what are simply called 'gifts', there are 'services' and there are 'activities' - all of which are given by the same Spirit of God.

If we cross reference this passage with Ephesians 4 and Romans 12, which also talk about spiritual gifts, we have more of an idea of the groups of gifts Paul is talking

about, though we need to bear in mind that the gifts are not exactly scientifically classifiable. There seems to be some overlap and blurring of lines as we try to define them - but we do get an overview.

**Gifts** - covers words of knowledge, words of wisdom, gift of faith, gifts of healings, miracles, prophecy, spiritual discernment & speaking in tongues - these seem to be the gifts that are more supernatural in nature.

**Service** - or ongoing roles - apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors & teachers.

**Activities** - leadership, acts of serving, acts of generosity, acts of mercy. In our own setting, we might add to this list contemporary parish ministries such as administration, catering, cleaning, gardening, pastoral care, children's ministry, scripture teaching, website development and the like.

2. We also learn that everyone receives a gift from God for the body of Christ.

The gift is not for ourselves - it is for the body of Christ. V7 'Everyone receives some manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.'

This assumes a community of believers, and it assumes that they are meeting together regularly - otherwise the way this verse is expressed has no meaning. We also read in 1 Peter 4:10 "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace."

One thing I firmly believe is that every gift a church needs to function as it is meant to can be found among its members. So that means that every church, no matter how small or large, how young or old, how wealthy or poor - has every gift it needs to grow and flourish as the body of Christ in its community. I'm reminded of Paul's words to the Philippians where he says, "My God shall supply all your needs, according to his riches in glory"

3. We learn that these gifts have a specific purpose.

Ephesians 4:11-13 tells us this: "The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."

So the purpose of the gifts is to equip the saints - that's us - for the work of ministry, which is to build one another up in our faith, so that we reach maturity in Christ. The whole reason we receive these wonderful gifts from God - supernatural or otherwise - is to serve one another and build each other up in our faith!

So if God has given us all gifts for the common good - do we know what our gifts are? If not, how do we find out?

I suspect that our particular talents and even spiritual gifts are part of our DNA, and so we're born with them. But it's only as we grow and mature as people, and then mature as believers in Christ that our gifts are revealed and uncovered. In the same way as a musical talent may remain latent until an opportunity reveals it, so our spiritual gifts may await opportunity to be uncovered.

I look back over my own Christian journey, and find this to be very true! I seem to be using gifts at this point in my life that I wouldn't have recognised twenty years ago. Jay has said to me more than once "I didn't know you had this in you when I married you!" Neither did I. No doubt they were always there - it has just taken the work of God in my life, and my response to his working, to uncover them.

It may be that some of the gifts God has given us don't surface until a need appears and we begin to pray about what to do. It is then we discover that God in His love and wisdom has already placed gifts within the church for dealing both with our problems and our opportunities.

One of the things that commonly happens in church life is that when people assume particular roles in the church, we tend to accept their ongoing service in those roles as a given. It's human nature to leave something to someone we feel is more gifted than we are in a particular area.

What can happen then, is that inevitably, in every church group, there are people whose gifts remain latent. They're not used and not refined. A far better scenario would be for those who have leadership in a particular area of church life to encourage others with similar gifts to share their calling; to mentor people to help them do what they do, till they could do it on their own if need be. In the secular world, it's called succession planning!

But what happens more often is that someone holds a position, or takes a role till they fall off their perch, or quit from overwork, or spit the dummy because they're disillusioned or they've simply had enough. Then there's a hole in that role or ministry till some brave soul puts up their hand to take it on.

In an ideal world, if someone who has a particular ministry finds it is time to step down, there should be someone in the wings, already confident, who could take over. Sadly, that isn't often the case. So when a vacancy occurs, there's a bit of a panic to find someone who can take it on.

However, despite this being less than ideal, in the churches where I've served, I have seen over and over again God call forth gifts from parishioners to meet new challenges and opportunities. I've spoken to folk in this church who have found themselves doing things like teaching scripture, leading worship, running a Bible

study, or preaching, who have found their ability and enthusiasm for the task has come as something of a surprise.

So back to the question - how do I find my gift if I don't already know what it is?

Let me close with three simple steps:

1. **Be prayerful** - say, "God, please show me what gift or gifts you've given me for my church." And be willing to listen to the input of other church members. They will sometimes see things you don't.
2. **Be alert** - to your own interests and passions, to your life experience and your areas of expertise. God works with who we are, not against who we are. Our interests & skills will often show us areas in which God wants to use us. Even if an area seems well covered, don't be afraid to offer to assist someone in your area of interest.
3. **Be courageous** - be willing to step into uncharted territory. If you are presented with an opportunity that you may not have considered before, give God the opportunity to show you whether this might be a gift he's uncovering for you. Are you drawn to it, interested in it? Then go for it! God may surprise you - and you may surprise yourself.

Finally - we need to all be open to the supernatural wind of the Spirit in our communal life and worship. The supernatural gifts God gives are just that - super-natural. They are outside our normal skills, talents, and often our comfort zones.

Whatever the gift or gifts are God has given us - they are given to be used. They will build us up for sure, but more than that, they will build up the body of Christ for the work of ministry and the growth of his Kingdom.

Let's pray.