

“The Spiritually-Gifted Giver”

(A Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost)

Text: Romans 12:1-8

Lectionary Texts: Exodus 1:8 - 2:10; Psalm 124; Matthew 16:13-20; Romans 12:1-8

Subject: Spiritually-gifted givers

Desired Response: Mature in this unique ministry

How To: Follow advice of someone gifted in this area.

How Long: As with many gifts, a level of comfort isn't achieved overnight.

Sermon in a Sentence: “It is a high honor to be called by God to be a spiritually-gifted giver and to mature in such a unique ministry.”

Worship Theme: “God gives gifts to His children to enable them to give those gifts back to Him.”

You've no doubt already heard a lot about spiritual gifts. So let me briefly review. Holy Spirit-given gifts—also known as “spiritual gifts”—are special abilities given to people by the Lord for them to use in ministry. Every believer has at least one. Most believers have more than one.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 Paul writes:

⁴ There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

In essence, Paul repeats himself three times for the sake of emphasis. When he writes “the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God” who gifts people in this fashion, Paul is not declaring subtle nuances. It's just Paul's way of saying the same thing using different words and, in so doing, giving particular emphasis to his words and the thought they convey.

The same is true of the earlier part of each of these phrases. There are “different kinds of gifts, different kinds of service, different kinds of working.” So, when we're considering spiritual gifts, we're talking about ways of serving God. We're speaking of working on His behalf. Gifts are not for personal aggrandizement. They're all about ministry.

In the paragraph that follows in this 1 Corinthians 4 text, Paul gives specific examples: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healings, miracles, prophecy, tongues, and so on. Unfortunately, in this passage Paul doesn't mention the gift I want to zero in on today. This particular gift also doesn't come up in Ephesians 4 or 1 Peter 4, two of the other three New Testament passages on this given topic of Spirit-given, or spiritual, gifts.

Fortunately, we have one more option. And, that is today's text, Romans 12:1-8. Let me read this passage. And, as you listen, see if you can guess which Spirit-given gift I believe God has prompted me to speak about today. Okay?

¹ Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

³ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. ⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

What I'm interested in exploring is the subject of "spiritually-gifted givers." And, of course, I know that **all** believers are expected to give to the ongoing work of the Lord. But, I believe there are some individuals both gifted and called by God to give in an extraordinary way. They're really quite amazing in how they maximize ministry through their Spirit-given gift of giving.

Here is how one of my friends, a psychologist and pastor who has long studied the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, describes such people. See if you identify with these words. Or, if someday you might like to.

- These are Christians who have discovered the joy of participative giving.
- They not only give because of responsibility, they truly enjoy writing the check.
- They find the passing of the offering plate as deep a worship experience as the preaching, or the music, or any other portion of the service.
- They have a good grasp on the truth of the Scriptural phrase, "God loves a cheerful giver."
- These participative givers also remember to regularly pray for those to whom they are giving.
- Giving for them is not just a check-writing exercise, but a personal involvement in the ministries to which they are giving, as well.
- Interestingly, these are not necessarily rich people. (Did you hear that? These are not necessarily rich people.)

- Instead, these are men and women who find that giving ten percent is just not enough. And, who feel an inner compulsion to give more.
- They understand they play a behind-the-scenes role. Nevertheless, they have come to understand that this role is an incredibly important one.

Then my friend shared two examples from Scripture—one positive, the other negative. One actually follows the other in Acts chapters 4 and 5. Let me begin reading at Acts 4:32 to put into context what was happening:

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was

distributed to anyone who had need.

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

So, from the time he's introduced in Scripture, Barnabas is an encourager. And, the way we find him initially manifesting this spiritual gift of encouragement is financially. You certainly don't get any hint here that his giving was an act of pride or personal aggrandizement.

The next 11 verses offer quite a contrast. They describe two more people who likewise sell a piece of property. Here's Acts 5:1-11:

¹ Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ² With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

³ Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴ Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶ Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

⁷ About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

⁹ Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

¹⁰ At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

From the proceeds of the sale of their land, this couple also gave voluntarily. And, it appears the sum donated was more than a tithe. Yet they are divinely punished by death for lying to the Lord. We can conclude that Ananias and Sapphira were **not** spiritually-gifted givers. So, as with other spiritual gifts, giving is an activity in which many, if not all, Christians can participate, but in which the spiritually-gifted giver excels.

What I am saying in a sentence is: *"It is a high honor to be called by God to be a spiritually-gifted giver and to mature in such a unique ministry."* Please let me say that again: *"It is a high honor to be called by God to be a spiritually-gifted giver and to mature in such a unique ministry."*

Then, because not all that much has been said about this gift of spiritually-gifted giving, I want to spend a few more moments looking at it.

I would first like to explore the "OBSTACLES to Developing This Gift."

One obstacle would be a lack of contemporary role models within the church. About the only role models for giving would be rich or famous folk who do things like staging concerts, benefit dinners, and the like. Such causes may be worthy. But, these people are not necessarily spiritually gifted in their giving. Their acts of generosity may, more often than not, simply be a way of self-aggrandizing, or even excusing other excesses in their lives.

A second obstacle follows the first. Since role models are few and far between, there is usually no one to mentor the fledgling giver. Yes, some churches do provide instruction that helps people identify and use spiritual gifts. But, all too often this instruction ignores the potential spiritually-gifted giver. Part of the reason for this is that we are very shy when it comes to talking about money.

On the one hand, the church needs finances in order to do the work God has called it to do. But, on the other hand, some evangelists and parachurch organizations have so embarrassed the church by the methods they have used to promote giving to their ministries, that the church is reluctant to become accused of "always talking about money." The church's response is to often minimize or even overlook frank and helpful discussions about the wonderful Spirit-given gift of giving.

Granted, there is an abundance of literature on tithing. But, we have already established that this Spirit-given gift of giving is something above and beyond simply tithing. Similarly, there are also several organizations that do a marvelous job instructing people about money management. But again, they don't cover how to function as a spiritually-gifted giver.

A third obstacle is that, by its very nature, spiritually-gifted giving is done in private. Like humility, once a person says he or she has it, people start to question whether that person really does. It's a little like that with giving that is prompted by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus made it clear in Matthew 6:1-4 that giving is to be done in secret:

¹ *"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven."*

² *"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."*

Jesus' phrase, "don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing," is a good way to think about it.

This difficulty leads to another underlying problem: namely, the assumption that most, if not all, spiritually-gifted givers are wealthy. Granted, there are many wealthy givers who function under the Spirit's influence. But, there are probably just as many middle class or poor people who are gifted this way, as well. Yes, as hard as it may be for us to understand, spiritually-gifted giving is not a spiritual gift limited to the wealthy! Of course, middle class or poor spiritually-gifted givers don't give as much as wealthy spiritually-gifted givers might give. But, quantity has nothing to do with this gift.

In Mark 12:41-44 Jesus himself points out the widow who gave a fraction of a penny at the temple and, in doing so, out gave all the others. Remember this passage:

⁴¹ Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. ⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

⁴³ Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴ They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."

Finally, and probably the most dangerous obstacle, is that of the unappreciative or actively opposed spouse. Being understanding and supportive can be very hard for the mate who doesn't share in this gift or calling. If your spouse is regularly opposed to you practicing your Spirit-given gift as a spiritually-gifted giver, you have a serious problem

Next, I want us to consider the TEMPTATIONS related to the use of this gift of spiritually-gifted giving.

First, the accumulation of money can be a temptation. Just because you love to give to God's work doesn't mean you won't be tempted to keep "just a little more" for yourself. The suggestion is that you keep a list of your giving, make it a part of your budget and stick to it.

Don't be willing to sacrifice your giving for other things. If God held together the sandals of the children of Israel for forty years in the wilderness, your shoes will probably last for another season or two. Those truly skilled in the use of this gift say, "Give up your vacation before you give up your giftedness." Resaid, sometimes you'll have to fight hard to protect what God has uniquely called you to be and to do.

The second temptation is to keep money "just in case." In 1 Timothy 5:8, Paul states that not providing for your family is like being an unbeliever. So this is an important matter. The temptation, however, will be to say you need to keep more money in order to support your family, when often that's not true. Keeping too much leads to self-sufficiency and works against our relying on the Lord. This can become dangerous.

In Revelation 3:17 the Laodiceans were apparently so rich they didn't think they needed God. Suffice it to say that spiritually-gifted givers need to discover the right balance for themselves regarding these matters.

Third, a temptation can develop that says, "If I work more overtime I'll make more money and then I can give more." But, the problem of working longer hours to earn more is that you have shifted your focus to "making" money and not "using" money. The result is that you spend more energy in bringing in money and not on the causes or organizations you're supporting. Remember, the spiritually-gifted giver will spend a significant amount of time praying for those he or she supports. And, whenever God provides the strength and opportunity, the spiritually-gifted giver will roll up his or her sleeves and help in ways that go beyond the giving of money.

A fourth temptation is pride. Christ's important corrective about "not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing" is great, in that it prevents comparisons. If I don't know what percentage you are giving, and you don't know the percentage I am giving, we won't draw any unfortunate conclusions. And, why take pride in what we give to God when, first of all, it comes from Him to begin with. And, secondly, sooner or later we have to surrender it all anyway?

The fifth unique temptation is to confuse giving with controlling. Subsequently, there is a temptation for the spiritually-gifted giver to be offered a position of leadership in an organization to which he or she gives, when he or she really doesn't have that leadership spiritual gift. Resist the urge to play such a role of leadership unless you clearly see how your unique set of spiritual gifts will truly benefit a given ministry.

Last is a temptation that's the exact opposite of controlling. Let's call it detachment. This happens when a giver has donated to a given ministry for so long, there's little if any active involvement with what's going on within that ministry. Giving this way is a little like brushing your teeth. It's a good thing to do. But, it's become pretty much a routine function.

Focus on understanding and participating in those ministries for which you do have the time to keep informed about and to spend time in prayer. Once again, remember that this kind of giving is about more than just writing the check.

Lastly, let me briefly share some RECOMMENDATIONS to Keep in Mind, as a spiritually-gifted giver.

One: Be aware that the people who move the Kingdom of God forward are not necessarily the few rich givers. These do their part and we thank the Lord for them. But, the persons of average income and less, who also give because of their love for God, are more likely the giant economic force behind the overall advance of Kingdom matters.

Two: Spiritually-gifted givers should probably not look to the church's current programs or structure to provide instruction and direction regarding how to develop this unique spiritual gift. Ideally, of course, the church will someday come to understand how to nurture and develop this gift. Let's face it. It's to the advantage of the church to do so. But, the truth is, if God is presently calling you to develop this gift, you are going to end up being somewhat on your own. So, blessed is that interested individual who somehow finds another mature spiritually-gifted giver to help him or her understand and grow in the exercising of this Spirit-given gift.

Three: It follows that a spiritually-gifted giver must learn to be discerning. Please, hear me. You most likely don't have enough money to give to all the ministries or people who are convinced they could wisely use it. Learn to be discerning. And, if you are one who is just embarking on the exercising of this gift, start with the needs closest to you—those of your local church. Let God lead you in discerning how to best give to the ministry with which you are most closely involved.

Four: Keep telling yourself that, by itself, a need does not constitute a call from God for **you** to meet that need. An envelope in the mail is not necessarily a summons from the Lord for you to write a check. Especially, make certain that you don't feel the need to always act quickly. Take time to talk with the Lord about all such opportunities.

Five: Once you have truly and specifically given generously to your local church, begin to think globally about your giving. The Kingdom of God is not being advanced only by American

organizations. In fact, it may be more cost effective to support an indigenous missionary rather than sending a fellow American to a foreign country.

Six: Always keep in the forefront of your mind and heart that when you exercise your gift as a spiritually-gifted giver, you are giving to God and not to a specific ministry. If you truly believe that He is prompting you to give, nothing should stop you from contributing to a given work.

Yes, all leaders make mistakes. Some make decisions that over the course of time prove unwise. Others have been falsely accused. There are also those who have failed the Lord. That's just a fact. We can all be disappointed or fooled by people we believed in and supported. Just like a Christian with the gift of hospitality runs the risk of being robbed, the spiritually-gifted giver can also be taken advantage of. But, the focus must remain on the work God is doing. The truth is, in the long run He is the one who ultimately is being supported.

So, how are you responding to what you are hearing? My prayer has been that in spite of all these cautions, there will be one or two, or even three, of you who say, "You have been talking to me. I believe that what you've described may well be one of the spiritual gifts the Lord has graciously given me. I was keenly interested in everything you were saying."

"Yes" you say, "*It is a high honor to be called by God to be a spiritually-gifted giver and to mature in such a unique ministry.*"

You might even say, "I've had a wrong attitude. I'd actually gotten to the place where I resented all the people 'after my money.' You give to one new group and suddenly there are ten more hands out asking for help. Maybe I should take that as a compliment rather than an imposition. You're right, just because someone asks doesn't mean God thinks I'm supposed to write a check!"

Most of us will likely not have this wonderful spiritual gift. We will still give generously out of our response to God because we know all that we are and all that we have has come as a precious gift from Him. But, for those whom God has blessed with this very special gift—the spiritually-gifted giver—the days that lie ahead can become some of the most exciting and fulfilling days of your entire lives.

"It is a high honor to be called by God to be a spiritually-gifted giver and to mature in such a unique ministry. Amen.