

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, January 3, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MATTHEW 25:21

“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant!
You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge
of many things. Come, and share your master’s happiness!’”

GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT

I began the introductory sermon in our series on “Spiritual Gifts” with these words, “I am convinced that the way God has provided for our new congregation to grow spiritually and numerically is for every Christian believer within the fellowship to discover, develop, and use his or her spiritual gift or gifts.”

What is a spiritual gift? It is “**a special attribute, given by the Holy Spirit to every member of the Body of Christ, according to God’s grace, for use within the context of the Body.**”

How many people have spiritual gifts? The answer is—**all Christian believers.** The moment you are born again by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, that same Spirit bestows upon you a unique spiritual gift.

Why do we need to know about spiritual gifts? For two very good reasons:

1. It will benefit you in your spiritual life by helping you to discover God’s will for your life. You will be a better person when you know for sure what God has called you to be and to do as a Christian.
2. The whole Church will benefit. When a congregation knows about spiritual gifts, it is a better Church than it was before, and it will function much more effectively.

But suppose I know all this, and yet decide not to discover, develop, and use my spiritual gift. What will happen? I will be in deep trouble. In 1 Corinthians 4:2 God says, “It is required of stewards that they be found faithful.” Now why is this important in our teaching on spiritual gifts? Well, look at 1 Peter 4:10, where the Apostle says, “Each believer should use whatever gift he has received to serve others as a faithful steward of God’s grace...”

Now a “steward,” as you know, is a servant who has been entrusted with the care of his master’s property. The very word “steward” comes from two root words, “sty” and “ward.” “Ward” is an old English word which means “keeper” or “guardian”; and a “sty” is the area in the barn where the pigs are kept. We still speak today about the “pig sty.” So, in old England the servant who looked after the pigs was called the “styward,” and in the evolution of our language

this became the word “steward.” But do remember that a “steward” was originally a servant who was entrusted with the care of his master’s pigs.

You see, then, what 1 Peter 4:10 means: “Each believer should use whatever gift he has received to serve others as a faithful steward.” Peter is telling us that we are stewards of our spiritual gifts. God has entrusted you with spiritual gifts, and you are to develop and use them as a faithful steward is required to do.

We read this morning our Lord’s Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30), which illustrates perfectly what it means to be “a faithful steward.” The “Living Bible” translates “talents” into “dollars,” and this makes it easier for us to understand. It is, of course, a parable of the business world, and in the business world the use of capital is to make more money; so here is a prosperous business man with capital who is going on a protracted business trip to a foreign country; but before he goes, he calls in three of his stewards; to one he entrusts \$5,000, to another \$2,000, and to the third \$1,000; and he tells them that during his absence he expects them to dispose of this money in such a way that it will make more money for him. When he finally returned, he summoned the three men to ascertain what had happened to his money! The first man reported that he had taken his \$5,000, had bought and sold with it, and had earned another \$5,000. The second man had put his \$2,000 to work and had earned another \$2,000. Now notice that the business tycoon who thus received such a good return on his investment did not say that the steward who brought him back \$10,000 was any better than the second chap who brought back \$4,000, because “to whom much is given, from him much is required” (Luke 12:48). The important thing was that both of those stewards used the money with which they were entrusted in the way it was supposed to be used. They both made money with the money they were given! And we remember the famous words of commendation spoken by that business man to those two servants: “Well done, good and faithful servant...!” And we link those words with 1 Corinthians 4:2, “It is required of stewards that they be found faithful...”

Now some people misinterpret those verses, and do you know what they say? They say, “Lord, I thank You that You do not require me to be successful; you only require me to be faithful!” But let me tell you—that’s a cop-out, and it doesn’t wash. It is diametrically opposed to Matthew 25 and the Parable of the Talents, and it runs counter to the biblical doctrine of stewardship. Here is the bottom line of biblical stewardship—the biblical steward takes the resources entrusted to him by his Master; he uses them for the Master’s purpose; and returns to bring glory to his Master! And the reason those two men were called “good and faithful servants” was that they took their master’s money, used it for the master’s purpose, and came back and brought glory to the master. In a word, they were successful; and the master would not have called them “faithful” if they had not been successful.

But there was a third man—the one who was entrusted with the \$1,000. He went out and buried it; he didn’t attempt to use it; he simply brought it back to the master intact; and the master said, “You wicked, lazy servant... get into the outer darkness!” He fired him on the spot. He was not a good steward; he was not a faithful steward because he did not use the master’s resources for the master’s purpose. The master said to him contemptuously, “Couldn’t you even have put that money of mine in the bank and got miserable passbook interest?! You did nothing with it.”

We are stewards of our spiritual gifts; and part of being a steward is that one day you are going to give an account of what you did with the gifts God entrusted to you. Here is the scenario: it is Judgment Day, and with a great throng of believers you are approaching the Judgment Seat of Christ. And as you are waiting your turn, you are handed a questionnaire. (Someone has said that because we believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, the questionnaire will probably be in triplicate!) But one of the questions on the questionnaire is this: “What did you do with your spiritual gifts?” And do you know what? Hundreds of thousands of Christians will get up there, and look at that question, and say, “What are spiritual gifts? I never heard of them!”

Now thank God, many Christians may not be able to verbalize what their spiritual gifts are, but they’re using them anyway. But many of them who have not discovered or used their gifts, and leave that question blank, are not going to get blamed for it. We are—we who are the pastors and leaders of the Church. There is a verse, James 3:1, that sometimes sends shivers up my spine. It says, “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”

Now, suppose that as a Christian I decide to discover, develop, and use my spiritual gifts. Then what will happen? Wonderful things will begin to happen!

1. Everybody in the church will know his or her spiritual job description. I believe that most Christians don’t know as much about their job as the average construction worker knows about his. You can go to where they are erecting a building, and everyone knows what contribution he is making to the construction of that building. A man may be carrying bricks up a ladder to the bricklayer, but he knows that that is his specific job. But you ask the average Christian what he is doing to build the spiritual Temple, the Church, and you get a blank stare!

One of the neat things that happens when a church begins discovering and using spiritual gifts concerns the nominating committee. When the church members know their spiritual gifts, the nominating committee becomes a screening committee, because people come to the committee to apply to work in the church, and you have a completely different ball game! You know how it is in most churches—you call someone up and say, “Oh, come on; just for one year; you can do it!” One of the reasons our churches don’t operate as they should in the USA is that a huge proportion of lay people who are working on the boards and committees of the church are recruited on the basis of availability, rather than on the basis of giftedness. And that is not God’s design for the Body of Christ. The Holy Spirit has given Christians spiritual gifts to enable them to make their contribution to the Body life; and we have so often recruited them on the basis of their having enough time to do a job, instead of on the basis of who has the gifts for the particular job.

2. Another thing that will happen is this—all members will be able to work together in love and harmony and enthusiasm. There will be changed attitudes. Indeed, negative attitudes will be laid to rest. For example, when you discover your spiritual gift within the Body, there is no room for pride, because you know that your gift has been bestowed on you by God, and you can’t take any credit for it. You didn’t receive the gift because you worked for it or prayed for it; God, by His grace, gave it to you. And so, you can recognize and talk about your gift, and thank

God for it, and be enthusiastic about it, and enjoy using it; but without a trace of pride—just gratitude to God the Giver.

Again, there will be no envy. Envy is a carnal sin, and it is not unknown in a church that doesn't know anything about spiritual gifts. It is caused when one person can do something that someone else can't do, and the "can't do" person gets all bent out of shape with envy. But in a Spirit-filled church, even when two people have the same gift, but number one has a greater measure of the gift than the other, number two doesn't become envious or jealous. Romans 12:4 reminds us that "in one body we have many members," and each member has its part to play. For example, I have two hands—two distinct members of my body. I happen to be right-handed, which means that my right hand can do a lot of things my left hand can't. But does it matter? They work harmoniously together. They're not envious of one another. When I play catch, I can't throw with my left hand, but I can catch with it! Now it is the same way with the Body of Christ. All work together with a great deal of harmony when spiritual gifts are recognized, developed, and used. People in the church accept the fact that some fellow believers are five talent people, while others have only two talents, or perhaps only one; but each of us wants to use what God has given us, and that is all that matters.

No pride; no envy; and no false humility. Now I know the Bible teaches the need for humility. I always chuckle when I see that TV commercial where the little jockey is standing in the shower singing

“O Lord, it's hard to be humble,
When you're perfect in every way!”

Yes, we do need to be humble, but some people are so wretchedly humble that they're useless! And that is false; it is not biblical humility. They have such a low self-image; they think they're nothing. They remember John Newton's original wording of his hymn

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a worm like me!”

And that's how they think of themselves—as a “worm”; when all the while they should be rejoicing in the fact that God has given them a particular gift, tailor-made for them, and put them in the Body for a purpose that God has designed.

Do you know why there's such a lack of love in many churches today? It is because people have not come to terms with themselves; and psychology has taught us that if you can't come to terms with yourself, you can't come to terms with others. If you don't have self-esteem, you can't love anybody else because you're all bottled up trying to figure out who you are. And one fine thing that the discovery of spiritual gifts does is to help Christians build up self-esteem. They know what God has done for them and in them, and so they are freed to love and minister to others. So, love and harmony and effectiveness are produced through the discovery and use of spiritual gifts.

3. Still another thing that will happen with the discovery of spiritual gifts is that **it helps the**

church grow and mature. In that marvelous fourth chapter of Ephesians, St. Paul enumerates some of the gifts that God bestows on Christian believers, and he says that they are given “to equip God’s people for the work of ministry, so that the Body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants... Instead... we will in all things grow up into Him Who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him, the whole Body... grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work”—that is, as each believer exercises his or her spiritual gifts (Ephesians 4:12-16).

That is true Church growth—growth in quantity, but especially growth in quality.

4. And finally, through the discovery and use of the gifts, **God will be glorified.** I took as the text for our introductory sermon on spiritual gifts the words of 1 Peter 4:10, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” But the Apostle then proceeds to give us the basic reason why we should use the spiritual gifts God has bestowed on us; and the reason is this: “so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 4:11).

Can you think of anything more important than to glorify God in your life every day? Back in 1643 the Westminster Assembly of Divines met at Westminster Abbey in London to formulate, amongst other things, a Catechism that adults and children could memorize. And with that rare spiritual genius and insight that characterized all their work during the next six years, they asked as the very first question in that “Shorter Catechism”:

“What is the chief end of man?”—

that is to say, “What is the real reason for our existence upon this earth?” And the answer is sublime:

“Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”

What a challenge to keep before us as we enter 1988! Don’t turn over a new leaf this January. Only a worm turns over a new leaf! Instead of making the traditional New Year’s resolutions, here’s what I want you to do. I would like you to go home from this service, and sometime during today sit down with a pen and paper in hand, and thoughtfully and prayerfully make a list of the ways in which you as an individual can glorify God during 1988.

Be very definite about it. Can you glorify God by being a better husband and father, wife and mother? Write down specific ways in which you can improve as a spouse and parent. Can you glorify God by becoming a more avid student of the Bible, by having a scheduled time for daily prayer, by discovering and beginning to use your spiritual gifts, by being more conscientious and a more effective Christian witness at work?

Make your list, and then place it in your study Bible where you can refer to it every day,

and thus chart your progress in grace. If you do, then I guarantee that 1988 will be the very best year you have yet experienced in all your life!

AMEN.