

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, August 28, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

1 PETER 4:10 and 1 TIMOTHY 4:14

“As each one has received a spiritual
gift, employ it in serving one another.”
“Do not neglect the gift you have.”

HOW TO DISCOVER YOUR SPIRITUAL GIFTS

There is a famous oil field in West Texas known as “Yates Pool.” During the depression of the 1930s this field was a sheep ranch owned by a man named Yates. Mr. Yates wasn’t able to make enough on his ranching operation to pay the principal and interest on the mortgage, so he was in danger of losing his ranch. With little money for food or clothes, his family, like many others, had to live on government subsidy.

Day after day, as he grazed his sheep over those rolling hills, he kept thinking, “How can I possibly pay my bills?” Then one day a seismographic crew from an oil company came into the area and told him that there might be oil on his land. They asked permission to drill a wildcat well, and he signed a lease contract.

At 1,115 feet, they struck a huge oil reserve. The first well came in at 80,000 barrels a day. Many subsequent wells were more than twice as large. In fact, 30 years after the discovery, a government test of one of the wells showed that it still had a potential flow of 125,000 barrels of oil a day. And Mr. Yates owned it all! The day he purchased the land, he had received the oil and mineral rights. Yet he had been living on relief -- a multimillionaire living in poverty. The problem? He didn’t know the oil was there, even though he owned it.

Many Christians have a similar problem. They live in spiritual poverty, unaware of the untold wealth the Holy Spirit has given them in the form of spiritual gifts.

How can you know what gifts God has given you? Can you follow certain procedures to discover which ones you have? Indeed, you can, and in fact God expects you to discern them. Our heavenly Father doesn’t play “hide and seek” with His children. He wants you to see yourself as He sees you.

1. The search begins with FAITH. First of all, you have to be a Christian. Spiritual gifts are given only to members of the Body of Christ. Unfortunately, not all church members in America are truly members of the Body of Christ. They may attend regularly, give generously, serve on boards and committees of the church, and yet never have entered into that personal relationship with the Savior which makes a person a true, born-again believer. Make sure that you have asked Him to come into your life to save you from sin and death, and to prepare you to serve Him effectively in the power of the Holy Spirit. You must do this before you look for spiritual gifts, because if you are not yet in the Body, you do not have a spiritual gift at all.

But not only must you have saving faith in Christ, you must also believe that you are indeed a gifted person; you must have faith that God has given you a spiritual gift. Some Christians think this is too good to be true. They see spiritual gifts as special rewards for the spiritual elite. But this is not so. At the moment you become a Christian you receive at least one spiritual gift. 1 Peter 4:10 says, “As each one has received a spiritual gift, employ it in serving one another.”

You see, God wants you to be an instrument, not an ornament. Most sports today are what we call “spectator sports,” that is to say, games are watched rather than played. People pack huge stadiums, or lounge at home in front of the television screen with beer in hand, watching games being played, rather than participating in them. And I’m afraid that “spectator sport” mentality is manifesting itself increasingly in the Christian Church. More and more we see evidence of people just sitting back in crowds enjoying the music and the preaching and the programs the church provides, while a few people are expected to be doing all the work. Needless to say, that is a complete denial of the New Testament doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ, where every single member has a gift, a responsibility, and a function. And if God sees that you want to discover your gift, so that you may develop and use it for the welfare of the whole Body, then believe me, He will leave you in no doubt as to what your gift is.

2. Faith inevitably leads to PRAYER. As you seek to discover, develop and use your particular gift or gifts, you must constantly pray that God will indeed reveal your gift to you, and then lead you into appropriate avenues of service. James 1~5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God Who gives generously to all... and it will be given to him.” And James says later on, “You do not have, because you do not ask” (4:2). So, make this a matter of constant and believing prayer, and see how the Lord will unlock the splendid possibilities for a fruitful spiritual ministry that He has already placed within you.

3. Explore the Possibilities.

a. Study the Bible. Read the major passages on spiritual gifts time and time again, especially Romans 12:1—8; 1 Corinthians, chapters 12:8-10, and Ephesians 4:11—16. Read them in several different translations. Then examine the Scriptures to find examples in the lives of good people in the Bible as to how these gifts worked in practice in their lives.

b. Read the sermons we have preached on the subject. This is the 19th and final message in the series, and we will be putting them all together in a binder so that you may read them, and reflect upon them, and discover where you fit into the picture.

c. Get to know gifted people. Talk to Christian friends who have discovered, developed, and are using their spiritual gifts. Find out how they describe what their gifts are, and how they pursue their Christian service through these gifts.

d. Make spiritual gifts a conversation piece. Sometimes we are not at ease talking about our gifts. We are afraid it may be mistaken for bragging. We must learn to shed our inhibitions and share openly with each other what our gifts are, and what they are not.

e. Attend a spiritual gifts seminar. There you will complete and evaluate a questionnaire which will enable you to see your areas of strength in Christian service; and this will point you to the particular gift or gifts that God has graciously bestowed upon you. Every new member should schedule a spiritual gift seminar during the first year of his or her membership in the church. Indeed, we plan to incorporate the workshop into our new members' class curriculum.

4. Experiment with as many gifts as you can. Some say that martyrdom is a gift, so I would not encourage you to begin with that one! One starting point is to look around and see what needs you can identify. Then try to do something to meet a need. Look for the needs of other people. Look for the needs of the church. Find out where you can be useful in any way and go to work. Be available for any job around the church you might be asked to do. Approach the task with a prayer that the Lord would show you, through that experience, whether you have a spiritual gift along those lines. Persevere and work hard. Give each job a fair shake, and never give up. I believe we must be unreservedly willing to do anything the Lord leads us to do if we want to discover the fullest use of our spiritual gifts. Willingness to try something new may uncover a gift we never knew we possessed.

We know that disuse of a limb results in atrophy or paralysis, so exercise of the body is of vital importance. Similarly, exercise is the only way to prevent the lapse or collapse of a spiritual gift.

Some believers who used their gifts in bygone days have allowed those gifts to cool almost into ashes. It is inspiring to know that Paul exhorts us to "fan into flame the gift of God which is in you" (2 Timothy 1:6). The verb "fan into flame" is used only this one time in the New Testament, and it means, of course, to rekindle slumbering ashes into a flame. Remember, once God gives a gift, He does not take it back. He expects you to use it.

D. L. Moody became, by the grace of God, the most powerful evangelist of the 19th century. As a young Christian he moved to Chicago, and at once sought to serve his Lord in some way. He was directed to North Wells Sunday School in a poor part of the city. He knew he wasn't equipped yet to teach, but he asked the superintendent what job he had for him. Casually the superintendent invited Moody to go out into the streets and alleys and round up boys wherever he could find them. Both the superintendent and Moody had no idea what this activity would lead to, but amazingly, within a few weeks Moody had more than 100 boys coming to Sunday School; and what do you know -- he became their teacher! You see, by exposing himself to helping where he could, the 19-year-old Moody progressed to teaching, then to worldwide evangelism, and ultimately to founding the renowned Moody Bible Institute, which was built almost on the site of his early Sunday School ministry.

While you are experimenting with the gifts, it is just as important to discover which gifts you don't have, as to discover which ones you do have. Here is a young Christian who is asked to teach a Sunday School class of 12-year-old boys. From the very outset, he has little enthusiasm for the task. He doesn't have much of a way with words, and each week he finds preparation for teaching a nightmare. As well as that, the students in his class certainly don't have the gift of listening, and he realizes sadly that they do not find his presentation of God's Word at all interesting. Struggle as he might, the situation gets no better, but only worse, until he attends a seminar on spiritual gifts only to discover that teaching is not one of his gifts. In the

meantime, that young man has discovered that he greatly enjoys helping people who are in need of one kind or another, and his ministry in that area has been greatly appreciated; and the seminar confirms the fact that he does possess the gift of showing mercy.

5. Examine your feelings. This is based on some assumptions. One is that God is our Creator, and as such He knows us better than anybody else. Indeed, He knows us better than we know ourselves. He understands our temperament, personality and emotions perfectly. He also knows that when we attempt a specific task, we do a better job if we enjoy doing it than if we don't. So, another assumption is that God has matched our personality and temperament with the spiritual gift He has given us, so that if we have a certain gift, we will enjoy using it; it will be a pleasure to use it. How wrong to assume that because we enjoy some particular service that this ministry cannot be God's will for us; or to deduce that because something is distasteful, this must be God's plan for us! It is not surprising that the Greek word for "gift," "charisma," comes from the root word "char," which means "**joy.**" Joy comes through discovering, developing and using what God has given us. When a person discovers his gift, and a place of ministry for it, he may well exclaim, "I've found it! This is it!" Someone has called this the "Eureka" principle. And this delight in finding your gift continues, so that the person years later will still be saying, "This is what I'd rather be doing for the Lord than anything else in the world. This is my thing. This turns me on!"

This "delight" criterion in discovering one's gifts seems equivalent to the "peace of God" principle in ascertaining God's will. A person who has diligently sought to know the will of God, then moved out in obedient faith, may find added corroboration in the inner peace that God bestows. Paul says in Colossians 3:15, "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts"; and what that verb "rule" really means is this: "Let the peace of Christ be the umpire to render a decision that you are in fact doing God's will." Likewise, the inner joy a person experiences in exercising a gift may well indicate that this is indeed that person's gift.

So, as you are experimenting, examine your feelings. If your feelings indicate that you hate doing something, that may be one indication that you don't have the gift. This, of course, can easily be used as a cop-out, so make sure that your experimentation is valid, and that you have done it with prayer.

6. Evaluate your effectiveness. When you look at the list of spiritual gifts, you will notice that most of these gifts are task-oriented gifts — that is to say, they are given to us so that we may accomplish a certain task. So, if we do have a particular gift, what that gift is supposed to do will work, and people will be blessed. If you have the gift of evangelism, you will be leading people to Christ. Why? Because God has given you the supernatural help you need to bring them to the Savior. The ability comes from the Holy Spirit Himself. If you have the gift of exhortation or counseling, you will be helping people deal with their problems. If you have the gift of healing, sick people will get well. If you have the gift of administration, the organization will run smoothly. Similarly, with teaching. A friend of mine, who is a superb communicator, says very unselfconsciously, "When I teach, people learn."

Conversely, if you experiment with a gift and consistently find that what it is supposed to do doesn't happen, then you probably have discovered another one of the gifts that God has not given you. If you're teaching, and students stay away in droves, think about doing something

else!

7. Expect confirmation from your fellow believers within the Body of Christ. What do others in the church say about you? In what area do people look up to you? What have you done in the past for which you were genuinely complimented? Are you known as a serious student of the Scriptures? You may have the gift of teaching. Are you known as one who says the right thing at the right time? You may have the gift of wisdom. Do people with serious problems come seeking your help and counsel? You probably have the gift of exhortation.

In a word, if you think you have a particular spiritual gift, and are trying to exercise it, but no one else in the church thinks you have it, you probably don't have it. It needs to be confirmed.

Now remember that I said you should examine your feelings as to whether you enjoy doing some piece of service for the Lord; and feelings are important, but they are far from being infallible. You may have a deep desire to help other people, for example. You may feel strongly that God is calling you to minister through counseling or the gift of exhortation. But if you are experimenting with counseling and find over a period of time that no one seeks you out for help, you have good reason to doubt the validity of your feelings so far as that particular spiritual gift is concerned.

The gifts are given for use within the context of the Body, and that is why it is necessary that the other members of the Body have the final word in confirming your gift.

One of the reasons confirmation from the Body is so important is that it builds in a system of accountability for the use of your gift. I know it's true that we are ultimately accountable to God; nevertheless, He expects us to be accountable to one another, and to take this accountability seriously. For example, if you have the gift of showing mercy, or of teaching, but nobody else knows it, you may choose to be lazy about using it, and no one will know the difference. But once your gift is recognized and confirmed by the Body, then your fellow Christians will expect to see you using it. When members of the Body confirm one another's gifts, more gets done, just on the basis of people working harder.

As I have said, others frequently recognize that we don't possess a gift we think we have. But, on the other hand, frank discussion with fellow believers may help us to identify those gifts we do have. Others may see a gift in us long before we ourselves are aware of it.

Let me say in conclusion that the existence of a gift is a call to exercise it. Eyes are purposeless unless they exercise the gift of sight. Paul exhorted young Timothy, "Do not neglect the gift you have." God wants you to discover, develop and use your gifts.

The gifts work because they are God's method for getting His work done; and He wants you to discover, develop and use them for His glory. And you will discover them if you begin with faith and prayer, and then explore the possibilities, experiment with as many gifts as you can, examine your feelings, evaluate your effectiveness, and expect confirmation from your fellow Christians.

May the Lord richly bless you as you make your search.

AMEN.