

“Spiritual Gifts.” Romans 12:3-8 Steve Harden 9/4/22

Alright, let's get to it: Romans 12. We'll be looking at verses 3-8 this morning. Shane is out this week, our senior pastor as Daniel said I'm Steve, your executive director. So, you get me today! It's always a pleasure to be able to address you all. The subject today is spiritual gifts. It's a fun one! It's a good one for us to understand. My effort to define spiritual gifts is to say: spiritual gifts are supernatural abilities that show up in the lives of believers. They are used by the Holy Spirit to build up the body of Christ and to advance His kingdom. That's what they are for. I really like how Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 12, he calls these gifts 'manifestations of the Spirit.' Isn't that beautiful? The Holy Spirit somehow manifests Himself through the lives of individual believers to build up the body of Christ, to encourage one another. I love that! God is making Himself known, displaying His beauty, fulfilling His plan for His people and for the world, by giving gifts to His children, His sons and daughters, so that they might carry out the work that He has for them to do. We are not in it alone! We are not dependent on our own knowledge, our own abilities, and our own skills! The Holy Spirit gives us exactly what we need, and that's just good news. That's really good news. He empowers us.

So, our starting point this morning on spiritual gifts is in Romans 12. We'll read verses 3-8 and then we'll explain them a little. This is the word of God.

“3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, 5 so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. 6 Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; 7 if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; 8 the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.”

This is the word of God.

So, really, this morning I just want to introduce the subject through this text, give you a little bit of overview, and so, I want to do that using three words. The first word is a warning, the second word is a clarification, and then the third word is a sampling: a warning, a clarification, and a sampling. So, let's jump in, a warning. Now, Paul will talk in this text about how God manifests His Spirit through spiritual gifts in the lives of believers. But isn't it interesting, he's careful to give a preamble to what he's going to say. I just found that interesting and I had to say, why is he doing that? Why doesn't he just jump into the spiritual gift conversation. He gives us a warning! Look at verse 3, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment.” Well why should we be tempted to think more highly about ourselves than we should? Well he goes on, verse 4, “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.” So, he tells us, don't think too highly of yourself! A good warning at any time, right?

But I think he says with spiritual gifting comes a temptation, and the temptation is to think that your gift is just a little bit more important than somebody else's gift. That's kind of what we do! You're going to think that! It shouldn't come as a big surprise, because everyone knows that the world revolves around me, right? Can we be honest enough to say that's kind of how we think. I'll be honest. I'll pick on Daniel. Daniel, I don't think about your world nearly as often as I do about mine. I just don't, right? My world centers around me, the center of the universe in my head! So, obviously, my gifts, my talents, my knowledge, my abilities come first and foremost! Paul says, 'Watch it! Watch it, Steve. That's not true.' He says, bring a little objectivity to your thinking. There are many manifestations of the Spirit to give the body everything we need. I don't have them all! And frankly, you don't have them all either, and that's the way it's designed. We are tempted to think that some gifts are more important than others, but it's just not true. You will tend to struggle with people who are just not as interested or committed in the same things as you are. It's just the way it is. You are tempted to think your gift is just a little bit more important than everyone else's.

For example, one of my gifts is teaching. I trust. I've been doing it a long time, so if it's not, we're in trouble, right? It's teaching. So, I am driven to know the truth. I am driven to communicate the truth about God and about men. I'm pretty passionate about it! I've told you over and over and over again, my most important question, the one I go to often is: "What is true?" Well, that kind of fits when somebody is gifted in terms of teaching, right? So, in light of Paul's warning, I see in myself that I need to be very cautious not to assume that my gifting is primary. Frankly, it's a good thing that we're not all teachers. Nothing would ever get done! We'd sit around and talk about theology, or we'd talk about the Bible, or we'd talk about this and that, we'd talk it to death and nothing would ever happen! It's just the way it is. The gift of teaching is not any more important than the gift of service, and the gift of mercy, and the gift of giving. We're all in this together. It's not about me! And frankly, it's not about you. It's about us!

I love Paul's analogy of the body that he uses here. Our bodies are woven together so masterfully and so skillfully that everything contributes to our health. Everything! The smallest molecule, if it's messed up, if it's out of whack, you're not going to feel good! You're not going to function well. You may not even know what's wrong, but you know that you don't feel good. Just know that our nature is to see everything through the lens of our own gifts, and really just not understand why other people can't get out of my way. That's why the warning is there. Before he gets into the description of the gifts, he says, 'Be careful!'

There's an old story that I love, so I'm going to share it with you. It says, once upon a time the animals decided that they should do something meaningful to meet the problems of the world. So, they organized a school! They adopted an activity curriculum of running, climbing, swimming and flying. To make it easier to administer the curriculum, all of the animals took all the subjects. The duck was excellent in swimming class. In fact, he was better than his instructor. But he made only passing grades in flying, and was very poor in running. Since he was slow in running, he had to drop swimming and stay after school to practice running. This caused his webbed feet to become badly worn so that he became only average in swimming. But average was quite acceptable, so nobody worried about that. Well, except the duck. The rabbit started at the top of his class in running, but developed a nervous twitch in his leg muscles because of so much makeup work in swimming. The squirrel was excellent in climbing but he encountered constant frustration in flying class because his teacher made him start from

the ground up instead of from the treetop down. He developed charley horses from overexertion, so he only got a C in climbing, and a D in running. The eagle was the problem child, and was severely disciplined for being nonconformist. In climbing classes he beat all the others to the top of the tree but he insisted on his own way of getting there. It's a humorous example of what happens when we start considering our own gifts to be more important than each other's. Paul warns us, 'Don't do that.' We all have a part to play. Celebrate one another's gifts! Celebrate the diversity that God gives us in the body of Christ. So, first thing, a warning.

The second word is a clarification. This point is not specifically drawn from this text but it's more of a contrast that we see throughout the New Testament in all the texts given on spiritual gifts. I think, it's my personal view, that it's really easy to get an over-simplistic view of gifts. I see a tendency to kind of see a reductionistic view that's not particularly accurate or helpful. For example, a moment ago I said I have the gift of teaching. Well, see that kind of labels me and puts me in a box. Well, I don't think God has those boxes, alright? I think it's instructive to us that of the five passages in the New Testament that deal with spiritual gifts, or grace gifts, none of the lists are the same! Not a one! In Ephesians 4, we have the most basic list. We have apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors/teachers. Then in 1 Corinthians 12 he starts out that way and then he moves from what seems to be the offices of the church into specific functions like miracles, and healings, helping, administrating, speaking in tongues, and interpreting tongues. Then 1 Corinthians 14 deals specifically with prophecy and tongues. Here in Romans 12 he has a bit of the office type gifts and the function type gifts, then in 1 Peter 4 he speaks only of speaking and service. It depends who is listing the gifts. I've seen people list 22 gifts, 7 gifts, 12 gifts, 9 gifts, and 19 gifts mentioned in these five passages.

So, what does that tell us? Does it tell us anything? Is Scripture wrong? Should they have gotten together and compiled so that we would know how many spiritual gifts there are? I don't think so. I think that in every passage, the theme of the passage is not on identifying your gifts, but on using your gifts. The emphasis is on function. It's on practicing them! I think the variation of lists was designed by God to keep us from being too caught up and obsessing over 'What is my gift?' Well, can I frankly say, I think we spend too much time thinking about, 'What is my gift? What can I do?' And it paralyzes us! God has uniquely gifted you to do exactly what he wants you to do. Period. Can we just say that? Can we say, He has uniquely gifted you with the combination of gifts and the degree of giftedness that He wants you to do. He mixes and matches these gifts to suit His purpose.

I love what Ephesians 2:10 says. Listen, he says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works," now listen closely, "which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Guys, if you are a follower of Christ, God has work for you to do, a specific work, a work that He has planned for you to do. It is ready for you to do! He knit you together in your mother's womb with those works in mind that He wants you to do. He has gifted you. He has brought experiences into your life. He has brought you skills and knowledge in your life to accomplish the tasks that He has prepared beforehand for you to do. Isn't that a beautiful thing? You don't have to worry about it! Just do what He sets before you! It's really kind of simple.

I don't know how, well I do know how, the Lord gifted Shelley and I with creative, artistic children, and I know it's a dad thing but I say, 'Okay, they got it from me because their mom still has hers,' right? It's a dad joke. It's all I've got. But, several years ago one of my daughters was sitting at the kitchen table and she was making a paint palette. I don't know what those are.

When you're colorblind, you just kind of paint things, just kind of, but it fascinated me what she was doing. She put one color up at the top left hand part of her sheet, and then she put another color on the top right hand of this sheet of paper. She started blending these two colors across the top of her page going from mostly this color and a little bit of the right color, and then blending across. Does that make any sense? I thought, that's kind of cool. But she didn't stop there! She added white to those colors down the length of the page, and so, with every color that she had she added a little bit more white, a little bit more white, a little bit more white. So before she was done on this single 8.5x11, starting with two colors, she ended with like 60 colors or so. It was really kind of fascinating for me.

Yes! That's it. That's the description. I think that's kind of like spiritual gifts in a Christians life. We get hung up on, 'What's your spiritual gift?' And I think, 'Okay, pick one!' We're all different, and we're all unique. God has created you specifically with everything you need to accomplish what He wants you to do. All of those colors are beautiful, but they're all very different. There's no two of us alike. He has mixed the colors on the palette of your life, and you're exactly the way He wants you to be. There are endless combinations of giftedness, skills and knowledge. We look differently. We think differently. We have different tastes in everything! We are all wired differently. We consider different things important, but we're all beautiful, because that's the way God wired us. No stereotypical Avatar at Grace & Peace, agreed? Okay. I'll hold you to that.

A warning, a clarification, and a sampling. Let's look at verse 6: "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness." Okay, let's go through these quickly. The gift of prophecy, now there are a couple of ways that this gift of prophecy is generally interpreted. A good number of people say that this gift in our day is proclaiming or preaching God's word, what I'm doing right now, a forthtelling, if you will, of His word. Probably this is the dominant position in our denomination, okay? It's a good interpretation.

I have a little bit different take on it, not all that different, just enhanced perhaps. The word prophecy in the original language can be interpreted as 'the one who stands in front of another person speaking for another.' See, that is preaching, right? I'm standing here preaching and telling you this is what God's word has said, and so, you see how that works out. More broadly defined it's a word supernaturally given to a person, to communicate to someone else, to build them up and encourage them. You see, in both definitions it certainly includes preaching, but in my opinion, it's not limited to preaching. Okay, so the apostles wrote down the words that God supernaturally gave them, and those words became our canon, the canon of Scripture, the Bible. The canon is closed. Nevermore will somebody add to the Scriptures. That is closed. It was given to us from the apostles by God, okay? In my understanding, words of prophecy are very different. They don't add to canon. That's closed. Never should you say, or I say, 'Thus saith the Lord.' You don't have that right. Don't say, 'God told me to tell you this.' You don't have that right, okay?

However, I think this gift of prophecy is more personal, being directed to a particular person in a particular situation for their encouragement. 1 Corinthians 14:3 says, "the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation." So in my

opinion, and you're welcome to not accept this, but there are times when God, Himself, manifests Himself through His Spirit to one of His children to give specific words to be shared with another one of His children when they need encouragement or comfort or consolation. He gives those to them. In my limited experience with this gift, God's love is so focused in; it becomes so precious. The fact that God would love me enough that when things are difficult, He would send someone to me in specific ways to tell me how much He loves me is beautiful and overwhelming. I think we need to be open to the Spirit's work to encourage one another. Call it what you want, I think it's words of prophecy. How this works out, say the Holy Spirit impresses on me to encourage someone, and I might come to them and say, 'You know, I don't know if any of this makes sense to you, I don't know if you're going through a rough time, but somehow I just feel impressed that I should share this with you. Take it for what it is. Pray about it, and see if it works. Discern if it's true.' If you come to me with that, I'm going to listen to you and then I will pray and discern to see if it's true. I think there's a reason Scripture tells us in 1 Corinthians 14 to earnestly desire the gift of prophecy, and in 1 Thessalonians 5, to not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophecies.

Let me just share a personal experience with you. Several years ago we went through a difficult season, I personally went through a difficult season, and kind of didn't know what God wanted for me or us in life. Most of us have been there at times, you know? And was just praying and asking God to give direction and purpose and stuff, and three different times in unrelated incidents in a very short amount of time, guys came up to me almost sheepishly, because this kind of thing makes us uncomfortable, right? And they said, 'Steve, take this for what it's worth, I feel impressed to share this Scripture with you.' I said, 'Thank you.' That was nice, that was good. And then a second person came up a few days later and he said, 'Steve, I don't know what to do other than I want to be obedient, and I feel like I'm supposed to share this Scripture verse with you.' 'Thank you! That's really nice. Thank you.' Accepted it, thought about it, and about five minutes later somebody, and this was during a worship service, somebody else came up to me and he said, 'I've never done this kind of thing before but I just feel like I need to share this Scripture verse with you, Steve.' All three were the same verse. It had never happened before, it never happened after. So, do you think I was encouraged? You can bet your life on it. Thank you, Lord. Do I know how to explain it? Nope. Do I try? Not really. I can tell you that I knew that God loved me. I can tell you that. I'll be forever grateful to Him for loving me so much that He sent three guys with the same text.

Alright, the gift of service. The Greek word for service is sometimes translated 'ministry' in the New Testament, and it has the same root word as the word deacon that we use! Now, he's not talking in the gifts of service, he's not talking about the office of deacon here, but a person who is gifted with the desire and the ability to serve others. Very broad in its explanation. I mean, it can be anything, right? But he's gifted in service, and you can kind of tell if that's your gifting if you see things that other people don't see. In a former pastorate I had an older gentleman who was a dear, dear friend, his name was John Alexander. John had the gift of service and he had it strong. He would see things. He would see a lightbulb out. He would see something that needed to be fixed, and he would go fix it before anybody else noticed! He didn't have to be asked. He didn't have to have the position. He didn't have anything. He just brought his tools and he fixed it. John had the gift of service. It's generally not glamorous or showy, often it's behind the scenes, but it's so desperately needed in the body of Christ. It's kind of like the

work of your heart, right? You don't ever see it, it's not flashy or showy, but we're in a mess if it quits and doesn't show up! The gift of service.

The gift of teaching. It is listed in all five of the New Testament lists, I just want to encourage you, there's no more fanfare, there's no more fuss regarding the gift of teaching than there is in any of the other gifts. It's just one of them. God gives his church teachers who are gifted with the ability to interpret the word and explain the word. This is a gift that is a requirement for a pastor or an elder, we're nominating elders today, right? So, it's something to think about. Some sort of a gift of teaching, it doesn't have to be preaching, it can be one on one teaching, it can be group teaching, but it has to be a part. I do want to add though, for example, although we believe that the office of pastor or elder in the local church is limited to men, that does not say that the gift of teaching is limited to men at all. Not at all. Some of the most gifted teachers I know are women. So women, don't pretend that you don't have this gift if you have the gift! Thank God for it! The church, as a whole, may not have utilized your gift as well as we should have, but don't pretend that the gift is not there. Don't deny it. All gifts are used to serve the body and build the kingdom.

The gift of exhortation. As with the other gifts, the gift of exhortation is a very broad category. Basically, the word means to encourage, an encourager. Exhort has the same root as the word 'paraclete.' Have you all heard that word? It's a word used of the Holy Spirit in terms of counselor. The Holy Spirit is our counselor. It literally means 'one who is called alongside to help.' So, it includes and encompasses the ideas of advising, pleading, encouraging, warning, strengthening, comforting, mentoring, all those types of things. For one person, the gift of exhortation, for those who have it, it may be to admonish another Christian. It may be to encourage them. It may mean to tell them to stay in the fight, to persevere through difficult days. It is all inclusive, but to encourage them in their walk with Christ.

The gift of giving is next. It's kind of self-explanatory, right? It means you supernaturally somehow love to give! You love to share, give away what you have, and you find a lot of joy in giving! You don't have to have the gift of giving to give, just like you don't need the gift of exhortation to encourage someone, right? We're all called to do that. We're all called to be generous with one another. But there are those who find a particular joy in being open-handed, and thrive on it! And when you see it, you know it. It's beautiful. It's just beautiful. People give with no hidden or ulterior motives, not trying to get something in return, right?

The gift of leadership. The word lead is translated from a word meaning 'to stand before.' It means 'to guide.' In Acts 27, Revelation 18 it's used of a pilot, the one who steers the ship, the gift of leadership.

Finally, the gift of mercy. The seventh and last, you never knew you could get through all seven spiritual gifts in one sermon, right? The seventh and last category there is showing mercy. The person who has the gift of mercy just actively feels and demonstrates sympathy and empathy for others. Again, those are obvious, maybe not to yourself, but to others. You can just see it when somebody just loves others and when they're going through a difficult time, it's in them. They are sensitive to suffering, and it generally leads to action to alleviate that suffering.

Those are the seven gifts listed in Romans 12. As we pull this across the line, land the plane, as preachers say, there's so much more that could and shall be said about spiritual gifts but not today. God gives us spiritual gifts for the good of each other. Hold onto that. It's for the good of the body. It's for each other's good. It's not so that you can shine. It's so that the body

functions well. He supernaturally empowers His children to serve one another. He really is the best gift giver. He gives all these gifts so that we can prosper and fulfill what we need to do to advance His kingdom. That's what it's about. Even in drawing this discussion of spiritual gifts to a close, I'd be remiss not to remind you that He is the best gift. Not what He's given to us, not the created thing, but He, Himself. He gave Himself to us bodily in the person of Jesus Christ. He came, lived among men, and then died to redeem us. When He returned to heaven, He sent us His Holy Spirit so that He could be with us. The best gift is Himself. All of our gifts are given to make much of Jesus. In any discussion or consideration of the gifts, may our attention always be not on the gift itself, but on the gift giver: His love and His purpose and His plan for His church. Let's pray.