

## Gifts Laid On The Altar

### Five Pre-Requisites For the Effective Use of Our Gifts

Romans 12:1-6a

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I'm going to be talking about spiritual gifts today, but not from the perspective of discovering the gifts or even of using more gifts on any given Sundays. Last week's sermon demonstrated that God intends us to use our gifts not just in the church, but also beyond the walls of the church. *That's where most of the work of the body must be happening.* It drives me crazy when people think that the only spiritual thing they can do is work for the church as an organization. Now I am grateful when people work for the church as an organization. And I think that all members do have certain responsibilities to the church as a local organization. But there are two things that I want to repeat from last Sunday: 1) the body is more than an organization and 2) the body works 24-7 out there in the world. Planting a tree for Indian Creek Nursery, or shooting a terrorist in Iraq *can* be a spiritual act of service for the Lord. So can changing diapers. Charles Spurgeon once had a lady tell him that she believed that she was called to the ministry. Spurgeon asked about her home and family, and when he found out that she had 13 children, he exclaimed with gusto, "Well, praise God, not only has he called you to the ministry but he's given you a congregation as well!" Our families are a ministry, are they not? And we have got to think in those categories and help others to think in those categories.

A pastor was retiring after 25 years in that church. As he came to clear out his bedroom he found a small bowl with 5 eggs and 1,000 British pounds in the bowl.

Baffled he called his wife and said: Darling, what is this little basket under the bed with five eggs and £1,000?

"Oh " she said "Every time you preach a bad sermon I put an egg in the basket"

Secretly the pastor was pretty pleased with himself: He thought, "Not bad! [Only] five bad sermons in 25 years."

"And what about the £1,000?" he asked.

And she said, "Well every time I get a dozen, I sell them!" [Martin Dale]

I say that because if I thought that preaching was the whole work of the ministry, I would get pretty depressed. I would feel like it is me against the world. But I just play a tiny part in the much larger drama that is going

on – Christians subduing every square inch of planet earth beneath Christ’s feet. And God has given His gifts to enable you in that. Now there is a lot that could be said on gifts for kingdom. But far more important than what gifts you have is that you have five pre-requisites in place. If you have these five characteristics, God will use you powerfully not matter what your gifts may be.

## I. **Crucifixion** (v. 1)

### A. The Urgent Need (“I beseech you”)

The first pre-requisite is that you need to lay yourself on the altar as a sacrifice to God every day. And I call this crucifixion because this is the form that our sacrifice is often described like in the New Testament. We are laying our own desires, aspirations and plans at the feet of Christ and saying, “Lord, what do YOU want me to do?”

Look at the urgent way that Paul starts this section on gifts. “I beseech you therefore brethren.” Others translate it, “I beg you” “I plead with you” and “I appeal to you.” Paul was indicating that it was not enough to have the gifts. You can exercise the gifts and still be a big fat zero. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul made that clear: he said, **Though I speak with the tongue of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as a sounding brass or a clanging symbol. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.** I have had times in my life when God has seen a very energetic Phil Kayser ministering, and I am convinced that He saw a big fat zero. I had been trying to do the work of the Spirit without the power and working of God’s Spirit. And that is the tragedy of many who live their lives on a barren plain. Paul says that it doesn’t have to be that way. Christ said that He came that we might have life, and that we might have it more abundantly. Our gifts must daily be laid upon the altar if God is going to use them.

So this first step is really a paradox. Only as we relinquish our bodies as a sacrifice to God can we use our bodies with power; or as Christ worded it, **unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain** (John 12:24). And He wasn’t talking about physical dying because He says, **he who does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he whose loses his life for My sake will find it.** (Matt. 10:38-39). That’s what a sacrifice is; its losing your life to Christ.

Remember that sacrifices in the O.T were consumed with fire - they no longer belonged to the former owner. Once the animal was burned up, in a very tangible way it left the hands of the owner and was given unreservedly to God. Now what is encouraging to me about this is that it levels the playing field. We are all equally big fat zeros apart from what God resurrects within us. As Richard Parker says, "God doesn't call people who are qualified. He calls people who are willing, and then He qualifies them." God doesn't need any of us. Either thinking too highly of ourselves or thinking too poorly of ourselves amounts to the same problem – focus on our own abilities. All of us must burn up ourselves on the altar and live our day by God's power and God's qualification.

Do you have daily sacrificed bodies? One radio preacher once said, "The problem with living sacrifices is that they tend to crawl off the altar." But God wants our bodies to be living on the altar of service to him. Not dead and inactive, nor living for ourselves. But living exclusively to God. D. L. Moody didn't think much of seminary degrees, but one time he said that he wanted the "O and O" degree -- "Out and Out" for Jesus. And when we are gripped with the truths of what God has done for us in chapters 1-11 it should make us out and out for Jesus 24-7.

B. The Compelling Reason ("therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God")

And by the way, that is the point of Paul's "therefore." The "therefore's" of Scripture give the logical implications of what has just been said earlier. One author said this "therefore" is the great hinge on which the book of Romans swings. Chapters 1-11 are the doctrine and chapters 12-16 are the practices that logically flow from that doctrine. Unless doctrine changes us, it is not doing what it was intended to do. My favorite teacher at Seminary was one who said that seminaries are the worst place to train pastors. Seminaries condition pastors to store information that is not being used. They are designed to make men sterile in their knowledge. Over and over he warned us that the truth of Scripture must draw us closer to God or it is guaranteed to harden us from failure to obey it. Paul didn't want that to happen. He said, "In light of all the incredible mercies of God which I have just told you about in chapters 1-11, you are responsible to be out and out for Jesus. Christ gave Himself entirely for you, he said, and now I am saying that you must take up your cross daily and follow Christ. You must lay yourself on the altar and leave it there." One man likened the church to a bus: one driver and many drowsy passengers. Paul in this passage says that it should not be a bus; it should be a body where each part is doing its important function.

C. The Consecrating Act (v. 1c)

1. An Act Of Believers Only (“brethren”)

I shouldn't have to state the obvious. Paul uses the word “brethren” because only believers can offer anything pleasing to God. The sacrifices of the unbelieving are said to be an abomination to God. So this consecrating act is an act of believers only. And only believers really have spiritual gifts anyway.

2. A Total Consecration (“bodies”)

But what I want you to notice is that the bodies of believers are important. God doesn't just want your souls. He wants everything. He wants total consecration. When you abuse your body with excessive caffeine or alcohol, when you deliberately abuse your body with bad sleeping and eating habits, just remember that it is God's property that you are abusing. You are throwing a stone through the window of God's temple. 1 Cor. 6:20 says, **“Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit which are God's.”** The evidence of a surrendered will is a dedicated body. And until your bodies are sacrificed to God, they will drag you down in your service rather than helping your gifts.

3. A Continuous Consecration (“living sacrifice”)

Point 3 says that it is a continuous consecration because the sacrifice is living. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul indicates that a dead sacrifice is much easier to give than a living one. Even an unbeliever is known to give his body to be burned. Believers can make that bodily sacrifice without love. It's much easier to end your life than to use it through the Spirit. So he says **“though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.”** Christ indicated that it's not enough to take up your cross once. He said, **“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”** Now do you understand why sanctification is not a once only event? You must constantly bring your body into submission to the will of God.

4. In Conformity With Scripture (“holy”)

He goes on and calls the sacrifice holy. Scripture alone can define what is holy and what is not. Sometimes churches call for sacrifices that Scripture has not called for. And we need to be reminded that our loyalty should not be to a denomination or to a pastor. It should be first and foremost to the Bible. If the sacrifices I call you to make cannot be justified from the Bible, they are not holy. They are going beyond the standard of holiness.

5. Acceptable To God

This sacrifice should also be acceptable to God, and not just to man.

6. Reasonable Service

It is to be reasonable. Actually the Greek word that is used can be translated as “logical.” If the sacrifice is irrational, don’t do it. That’s what cults want you to do – just shut off your mind and trust the leader. No, the Bible is not an irrational book, yet we find people who go off the deep end because they thought they heard a voice telling them to do something irrational. Sin is irrational, but not holiness. The Bible is our final revelation. That’s a safe guard that is so important on this first point. Some parachurch ministries call for so much sacrifice that you would have to sacrifice your family’s well being to do all that they want you to do. It is God and God alone who can make the call for ultimate sacrifices upon you. Now He will many times call you to make those sacrifices on behalf of other people. And if you have not crucified yourself to the Lord day by day, you won’t have what it takes to discern those calls. The first word is crucifixion.

II. **Transformation** (v. 2)

A. Incompatible With Conformity To World

Paul goes on to talk about transformation. Here is the second word. **And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.** Let me briefly mention the difference between conformity and transformation. One translation says, "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold." That's conformity. And let me point out that conformity to the world is not the only problem. There are many who are trying to conform to Christ without being transformed. You see the Greek for transformation is the word for metamorphosis. And I can illustrate the difference this way: You could squeeze a caterpillar into a mold that looked like a butterfly, but you would only make a mess, and kill it. It wouldn't be a butterfly unless that caterpillar went through the miraculous process of metamorphosis. So we shouldn't see the contrast as a choice between conformity to the world and conformity to Christ. Rather, it is the difference between a dead lifestyle of conformity (*however* that conformity is manifested) and a lifestyle of powerful transformation. It is all too possible for you to use your spiritual gifts in an outward way that is a mere conformity to the church or even a conformity to the Bible, but lacks of the power of the Spirit. Paul spoke of people who have an appearance of godliness but who deny the power thereby. That’s conformity, and it’s the world’s way. It is only as we daily come to the cross of Christ for cleansing

and for a fresh infilling of the Spirit that we can find this transforming power in our use of gifts. I tell you, there is nothing more wearying, and nothing that takes away the joy from your ministry faster than using your gifts without the refreshment of the cross.

- B. More Than Mere Conformity To Christ
- C. Transformation = Metamorphosis
- D. The Means Of Transformation
  - 1. Renewing The Mind

Now there is a key to receiving this. He says this happens through the renewing of our minds. Again, it is important to stress that godliness is not irrational. The rules of logic are found in Scripture. In fact, if any of you are interested, there is a homeschooling workbook that goes with Gordon Clark's logic book now, and it is filled with Biblical exercises in logic. I know of another entire college level logic course that is taught entirely from the Bible. The Bible is a reasonable document because it comes from the God of all knowledge. But that Bible must be carefully studied and implemented. The Greek word *dokimazo* means not only to examine, but also to examine by testing, or as one commentator put it *to find and to follow*. All the descriptors of this will of God show that it is the moral will of God - not some secret will. It is the Bible that has the power to transform us from the inside out, and if you have never developed the discipline of meditation in Scripture, start today. It is a marvelously powerful tool. It is like an umbilical cord to the power of heaven. But until you crucify your flesh, you will not have a desire to engage in this transforming process. So there is a logical order in these words.

- 2. Finding & Following God's Word (Greek of "prove")
  - a. good will of God
  - b. acceptable will of God
  - c. perfect will of God

### III. Evaluation (v. 3)

- A. Correct Evaluation Of His Gifts Enabled Paul To Speak With Boldness ("For I say, through the grace given to me")

Now when you have come for crucifixion and transformation, the rest of the points follow. Verse 3 indicates that we should evaluate our gifts. **For I say through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.** He is to think soberly (which involves evaluation). But this evaluation needs to be accurate. The first phrase shows that Paul knew how to evaluate his own

giftings. He said, **I say through the grace given to me...**” Paul knew what he had.

David Yarbrough relates a story that his missions teacher told him in school. His teacher, Herbert Jackson, had a car assigned to him when he was a new missionary, and it was a car that wouldn't start on its own. You had to have people push it and then pop it into gear, and that would get the spark plug firing and everything would go fine. After his initial start, he either left the car running, or parked it facing down a hill. He used this procedure for two years until ill health forced him to leave. He proudly told his new replacement how to handle the car. The new guy popped the hood, found a loose cable, tightened it, got into the car, turned the key, and the car started up with no problem. For two years Jackson had been engaged in a needless routine, assuming that he had no power. The power was there, but his failure to evaluate left him without it. And I think this is the way it is with many Christians. God has given them grace, but they assume they have none. God has given them spiritual gifts, but they assume that they have none.

When Paul spoke, ministered, disciplined, labored he was constantly aware of His gift as apostle. Even when everyone rejected him, like in Corinth, his sober evaluation of his gift gave him the ability to speak with authority, boldness and perseverance.

B. Every Believer Is Required To Have Similar Evaluation (“to everyone who is among you”)

And Paul wanted every believer to gain confidence in the use of their gifts by the realization that they were gifted by God and accountable to him. People may not appreciate your gift of exhortation, or your gift of hospitality or whatever, but you can gain satisfaction in using it if you are convinced that God has given it for a reason. It's not enough for the elders to evaluate you, Paul wants everyone who is among you to do so. And he gives two parts to this exhortation: first avoid pride in using your gifts, and secondly, avoid false humility.

C. Avoid Pride When Looking At Your Gifts (“not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think”)

First, avoid pride - **not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think.** This can happen in various ways, but three common ways in which we think of ourselves too highly are gift glorification, projection and denigration. To glorify certain gifts can give a feeling of prestige to people who have the gift. They might think, “I don't want the gift of helps, I want the gift of teaching. Or I don't want the gift of mercy, I want a *real* gift like the gift of prophecy.” Sometimes God humbles our pride by the reactions of others. One pastor told me that their church had replaced paper

towels with hand blower driers. And the Sunday after they were installed, he found a note taped to the blower that said, “Please press this button for a short recorded message from your pastor.” Someone thought the pastor was just blowing hot air, and it deflated him. But Paul counteracted that in 1 Corinthians by pointing out that each part of the body is important. So that is gift glorification.

Gift projection is where we are an eye and we want the whole body to be an eye. C. Peter Wagner said, “They seem to say, ‘Here’s what I do, and God blesses it. If you just do what I do, God will bless you in the same way.’” Everybody is forced into the cookie cutter mold.

The third way is through gift denigration, where the gifted person does not see any need to be ministered to by another person. His pride won’t let him be helped. He’s the pull-himself-up-by-his-bootstraps type of person and feels bad if he in any way gets ministered too. All of those are symptoms of pride and deny the whole purpose for why God has given gifts to each person.

D. Avoid False Humility When Looking At Your Gifts (“but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith”)

But Paul goes to the other side of the coin and says that we can have a false humility as well. He says, **but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.** We are to honestly evaluate and when we poo poo our own giftedness, we are not thinking soberly. When we don’t serve because we don’t think we are gifted, we are hardly laying our gifts on the altar. For many years people in Canada told me that I had gifts for the pastoral ministry, but because of my shy nature and fear of the responsibilities of the ministry I didn’t want to listen. I was not thinking soberly.

E. Balanced Reflection (“think soberly”)

#### IV. Assimilation (vs. 4-5)

A. A Body Is Made Up Of Many Parts (v. 4a)

The fourth word is Assimilation. Assimilation of gifts into the body is important. If gifts are only exercised privately, they don’t build up the body. Let me give some examples. It is easy for a teacher to become addicted to study and to minimize teaching. It is easy for a person with the gift of administration to love his orderly arrangements and to be rough and gruff with people who don’t fit in. I knew one person who said, “I love the job, it’s the people I can’t stand.” Well, that’s a denial of verses 4 and 5. But even a person with the gift of mercy could fail to use it for the body. A person with the gift of mercy often feels pained when he or she sees another



person who is in pain. That pain and empathy is designed to motivate you to go and minister. But fear, pride or laziness could make the person with the gift of mercy do nothing. That means that he is being eaten up inside but with no outlet. That's not healthy. God made that person for the body. Gifts were given so that we could benefit the whole body. And when I say assimilation, it certainly includes the local church. But keep in mind what we said last week. The body is bigger than the local church.

It's easy for a person with the gift of hospitality to be so busy in serving that he or she spends little or no quality time with the people. Martha failed in that department. It's not as if Mary wasn't doing any hospitality or serving, but Mary knew when to leave the dishes in the sink and when to spend time with the people. God gave us to function as part of the body and to both receive ministry and give ministry to each other.

- B. Each Part Has A Different Function (v. 4b)
- C. This Unity In Diversity In Christ's Body Must Be Maintained (v. 5a)
- D. We Are Dependant Upon Each Other (v. 5b)

#### V. **Implementation** (vs. 6-8)

The last word is obvious. It is "implementation." Verse 6 says, **Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them.** There are latent gifts in this congregation that need to be stirred up and used. Even pastors need to be reminded of this. Paul told Timothy, **Do not neglect the gift that is in you** (1 Tim. 4:14) and again, **Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you** (2 Tim. 1:6).

- A. We Must Not Treat People Like Clones (v. 6ff)

*How* we implement is important as well. We must not treat people like clones ("**Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us**"). We must be faithful with what we have, and not always be trying to live like someone else ("**let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophecy in proportion to our faith**" etc.) I remember a friend who was constantly discouraged in his ministry because he wanted to be a second Billy Graham, and he wasn't succeeding. Actually it was his dad who was pushing him into being a Billy Graham. He tried to imitate everything Dr. Graham did. And his ministry has been very ineffective. God tells us to forget about comparing ourselves to others. Just be faithful with what you have. Not only was my friend unfaithful in using his gifts, but also he was misplaced where he was ministering. I am willing to serve in any capacity, and I have served in many capacities just because God has not provided someone else

to do the job. There is nothing wrong with that. I set up chairs on Sunday mornings because it is needed. Not a big deal. But there is a problem with trying to have your fingers in everyone's pie and doing poorly because you are doing too much. Ecclesiastes says, **whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.** Paul says, **he who gives, with liberality; he who leads with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.** It is very possible to lose your cheerfulness and to lose your diligence and generosity because you are burned out from misplacement. Because there is a body, there should be no need for that.

Our denomination has an entire Presbytery that is language based. It's a Korean Presbytery. One of our Korean pastors humorously tells how all the gifts are used in his congregation. He said,

Let me illustrate how gifts work together in a church. At our potluck last Sabbath, suppose someone dropped a plate full of Kim Chee on the new floor in the gym. This is how people with different gifts would respond. Gift of prophecy - That's what happens when you're not careful. Gift of service - Oh, let me help you clean it up. Gift of teaching - The reason that it fell was because it was too heavy on one side. Gift of exhortation - Next time, maybe you should let someone else carry it. Gift of giving - Here, you can have my Kim Chee. Gift of mercy - Don't feel too bad. It could have happened to anyone. Gift of administration - Lucas, would you get the mop? Soyeon, please help pick this up. Janet, could you get him another plate. We've all been gifted differently and so we act differently and we serve differently. [Martin Kim]

I thought that was good. Don't make others have to do things your way. There is variety for a purpose.

If you have become imbalanced in your use of gifts in any of these areas, the solution is to go back to the basics of verses 1-2 - it is to go back to the cross, to lay your gifts upon the altar and to receive the transforming work of Christ. More important than what you have is what Christ is doing through you.

#### B. We Must Be Faithful With What We Have (v. 6ff)

We should not only be faithful with what we have, but we should glory in the fact that there are differences. Verses 6-8 give a long list of gifts that are needed in the body. Leadership is not more important than service. Think of it this way: The country continued to function when President Reagan was shot and hospitalized for several days. Right? Things went on without too many glitches. But when the garbage men went on strike in Philadelphia, the piles of trash that accumulated made the whole city stink

and began to cause a health hazard. Think of what would happen if every garbage man in our country failed to do his job. It would be a mess. Who's more important – the president or the garbage man? I think you can see that at least on some levels it is a false question. Every part of society has its role. In a similar way, every person is needed for the body at large to function as it should, and we should not only be faithful with what we have, but glory in it.

- C. We Should Try To Avoid Misplacing Our Ministries (vs. 7-8)
- D. We Should Use Our Gifts From The Heart (“liberality ... diligence ... cheerfulness”)

In one of Ripley's Believe it or Not items, a plain bar of iron is picture and said to be worth \$5. The same bar of iron if made into horseshoes is said to be worth \$50. If it is made into needles, it is worth \$5,000. If it were made into balance springs for fine Swiss watches, it would be worthy \$500,000. Now I don't know how they came up with those figures, or even if they are accurate, but the point is that the raw material is not nearly so important as how it is developed. God says we have the raw material of spiritual gifts, but their worth to Him is in how they are developed. Have you laid your bar of iron on the altar for God to use and to refine, or are you trying to hammer away with that bar of iron in your own strength? God can do tremendous things through your lowly gifts if you are willing to let Him. He used the jawbone of a donkey to slay thousands. He used a dry old rod to part the Red Sea. The important question is this: Have you completely given yourself into God's hands for Him to use as He pleases. If your gifts are laid on the altar, the most insignificant gift can be used to accomplish great things. But as Zig Ziegler used to say, “You are the only person on earth who can use your ability.” We can exhort, teach and encourage. But you alone can use your gift. May you do so to His glory and through His power. Amen.