

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for July 11: What spiritual gifts can I use?

June 28, 2010

On Wednesdays at First Baptist Church in Knoxville, we have a noon Bible study and meal for people who work downtown. We have a large crowd and sometimes we do not have enough volunteers to serve drinks and keep the food line replenished.

A few years ago, to help out, our minister of pastoral care was filling up cups with ice before the meal. I walked over to him and said, "Thank you for doing that." He quickly replied, "It is what I got ordained for, to serve."

I was immediately struck by the simplicity and clarity with which he understood his call to ministry. I should not have been surprised; he has been a minister here 46 years. He often serves behind the scenes in hospital rooms, nursing homes and at funerals. He does not seek public recognition or accolades. With a spirit of servanthood and humility, he simply takes care of people.

And although I know he did not mean it this way, I felt put in my place by what he said. Too often, I serve Jesus for selfish reasons. I serve because I like to be in charge or because it makes me feel good about myself. He reminds me that any service we offer should be to build up the community, not just to message our own egos.

Our lesson passages for this week focus on spiritual gifts and how to use them appropriately. The emphasis is on recognizing, developing and employing spiritual gifts. The lesson encourages adults to use their spiritual gifts as God intends, which is to serve.

1 Corinthians 12-14 is one cohesive unit of Scripture where the Apostle Paul takes up a new topic, which is the issue of spiritual gifts, particularly in Corinthian worship assembly. Some Corinthian Christians were placing too much emphasis on the showy displays of spirituality. Particularly, the gift of speaking in tongues, and it caused division within the church. The tension between those who had different spiritual gifts was hurting the church.

Paul spends considerable time addressing this issue, which indicates its importance to him. Over the course of these three chapters, Paul carefully explains where spiritual gifts come from and how they are to be used.

First, he points out that our spiritual gifts are signs of God's grace. They do not come from human effort. Through his Spirit, God distributes them to his children at his pleasure. And honestly, one of the beauties of the church is that it never is homogenous. Individuals exercise diverse gifts for one purpose—to build up the community.

Paul sums up his argument by saying, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27). Paul's point is that our gifts are not for us, although individuals receive them, they are for the whole church. Each of us has a responsibility to utilize our gifts in the body of Christ for God's glory.

Although he is not talking about spiritual gifts, Philip Yancey tells a great story about his church in Chicago that illustrates how the body can work together. During a difficult time, his church decided to hold an all-night prayer vigil. Several people spoke up and voiced concerns about the meeting. They were worried about the safety of people staying all night at the church in their inner-city neighborhood.

But the poorest members of their congregation, a group of senior citizens from a housing project across the street, responded enthusiastically to the

vigil. One African-American woman in her 90s, who walked with a cane and could not see well, explained why she wanted to stay at the church all night and pray.

She said: “You see they’s lots of things we can’t do in this church. We ain’t so educated, and we ain’t got as much energy as some of you younger folks. But we can pray. We got time, and we got faith. Some of us don’t sleep much anyway. We can pray all night if needs be.” When a church is at its best, everyone has a place to serve and utilize their gifts.

Paul discusses spiritual gifts in several of his letters, yet he never gives the exact same list of gifts twice. Perhaps he does this on purpose. He does not want us to pigeonhole one another or to compare gifts. All members of the Christian community receive gifts, not just a few and not just the leaders. What will happen if we really begin to believe that everyone in our church is gifted? Maybe the 80/20 rule, which says that 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work, will be shattered. And even children, senior adults, the disabled, the rich and the poor among us will find they can contribute to God’s work in the world through the church.

In the midst of this section on spiritual gifts, we find one of the most popular wedding passages in the entire Bible, 1 Corinthians 13. This chapter on love may seem out of place within this discussion. However, Paul deliberately places this emphasis on love here to remind the Christian community that spiritual actions without love are meaningless. Paul wants believers to think about their motives.

Why do you serve? Is it to build up the community or to massage your own ego? In humility and love, Paul encourages us to learn to exercise our spiritual gifts for the purpose God intends them—for serving our Christian community.