



GIFTS

*"Find your spiritual gift and wrap your life around it."
— Ron Ritchie*

*"God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another."
— 1 Peter 4:10 (NLT)*

*"To become aware that God himself has equipped you – yes, you! – with a uniquely designed pattern of spiritual gifts and has placed you exactly where He wants you in order to minister those gifts, is to enter a whole new dimension of exciting possibility."
— Ray Stedman*

The Dead Sea isn't named "dead" for nothing. Nothing can live in it. It's an interesting place, to be sure. For starters, it's the lowest place on the planet, over 1,200 feet below sea level. It's called a hypersaline body of water, almost nine times saltier than the ocean, full of minerals but little else. Water flows from Mt. Hermon in the north (9,200 feet high), down through the Sea of Galilee into the Jordan River which then spills into the Dead Sea just east of Jericho. But that's where everything grinds to a halt. The water just sits there. It has nowhere to go, no outlet to keep things moving along. It sits, and sits, and sits – discolored and dead.

The Dead Sea has often been compared to a Christian who has no spiritual outlet, no way of serving others and using his gifts. And there's a lot of truth to the analogy. It's very exciting to become a follower of Christ, and there's a lot to learn. But if we make maturity equal to learning, then it's logical that Christians simply focus on ingesting more and more knowledge without the accompanying practical application. We get a lot into our heads, but not necessarily much into our hearts or our hands and feet. We all know what happens when the winter holidays roll around: lots of great food, very little exercise. We settle into our easy chairs to watch another analogy – football games, where sixty thousand fans desperately in need of exercise observe 22 players, who are desperately in need of rest. Sometimes the church can be a lot like that.

How about you? If you were to draw a line, and on one end label number "one" as knowledge and on the other end, a "ten" as application, where would you rate yourself, assuming "five" is a healthy mix of both?

In the Old Testament, the book of Proverbs talks a lot about wisdom. The Hebrew word is *hokma*, which means the "skill of living." When you read Proverbs you realize it's very life-related and that wisdom is knowledge applied to real-life situations: money, words, sex, parenting, marriage, friendship, etc. And so biblical maturity has always meant knowledge applied to life.

When Jesus gathered his disciples, he did not invite them to spend three years in a classroom. He wasn't even an accredited rabbi. He asked them to be his followers, and that's immediately what they had to do – follow. They had to make a quick decision to leave their old lives behind, because following Jesus meant a lot of walking, and a lot of different, unusual, adventurous situations. He taught them through words and sermons and

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impromptu instructional moments, but he also taught them by showing them how to interact with people and how to serve people. And then, even when they felt unprepared and inadequate, he asked them to do the very things they had seen him do. One such event took place in Luke 10:

"... the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go."

A few days later, *"the seventy-two returned with joy and said, 'Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.'"*

Jesus replied, 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority... However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.'

At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.'

It was one of the few times that Jesus is recorded as being full

of pure joy. He was absolutely thrilled that his disciples had had the opportunity to experience first-hand the exhilaration of kingdom ministry. It was one thing for Jesus to do it himself, but he seemed to actually enjoy it more when he watched his men do it. He knew they would grow more if they had to do it themselves. The Apostle Paul expressed a similar idea when he instructed his young protégé Timothy:

"You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others." (2 Timothy 2:2)

It's easy to drive our kids around in cars, or to carry them on our shoulders – to do things for them. It's harder to patiently go through the process of teaching them to ride a bike, to be there when they crash. But it's also pretty exciting when they finally get the hang of it. Likewise, it's easier to give someone a fish than to teach them the skill that will last them a lifetime. People grow when they have to do something, especially if that something is a little bit terrifying, and they have to call upon reserves they didn't know they had.

A Servant Attitude

Sadly, the terms "minister" and "ministry" have pretty well become synonymous with "religious professional" in our culture. But minister simply means someone who serves. And the New Testament is full of talk about serving.

- *Mark 10:45* — "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve..."
- *Romans 12:7* — [regarding spiritual gifts] "If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach..."
- *Galatians 5:13* — "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."
- *Ephesians 6:7* — "Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men..."
- *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."
- *1 Peter 5:2* — "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve..."

All Christians are called to serve others. Jesus Himself modeled serving to his men, and still they balked at the idea. Peter didn't want Jesus to serve him by washing his feet, probably because he thought it was beneath Jesus to do so – something a lowly slave would do. On another occasion, Jesus, always on the lookout for teachable moments, once noticed that the disciples were beginning to squabble over which one of them would be most rewarded in the kingdom with important positions: Jesus called them together and said,

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first

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must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20)

A friend of mine likes to say, "I don't mind being a servant; I just don't want to be treated like one!" We want glory and prestige, and sometimes being a servant doesn't include a lot of either. Stacey Rinehart, in his book Upside Down, writes, "The choice of whether to follow the leadership path to power, authority, and control or the road to humility and putting others first is an important one."

Let's sum things up so far:

1. We grow when we apply what we've learned.
2. We grow when we focus on others and seek to meet their needs.

How Are You Wired?

Believe it or not, Christians are not all alike. We look different, we think differently, we have different personality types and idiosyncrasies. We're been wired up by God, and He seems to delight in creating uniqueness in people. There's an almost infinite variety in human design, inside and out. And let's face it — some of those people (not us, or at least not me) – are weird. They're different in a way that's tough to deal with sometimes. John Ortberg observes in his book Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them:

"In certain stores you will find a section of merchandise available at greatly reduced prices. The tip-off is a particular tag you will see on all the items in that area. Each tag carries the same words: 'as is.'"

"When you deal with human beings, you have come to the "as-is" corner of the universe. Think for a moment about someone in your life. Maybe the person you know best, love most. That person is *slightly irregular*."

And yet God loves them... and us. Amazingly, He appears to especially enjoy that slight irregularity. Paul points out that all Christians are different, and that they make up different parts of the Body of Christ, and that's exactly the way God planned it...

"Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one

part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.”

Not only are we different in personality, background, capacity, etc., but God has also given spiritual abilities to each Christian, abilities that are called “spiritual gifts.” Note: the New Testament word for “grace” and “gift” both come from the same root. Ray Stedman, in his book *Body Life*, described the nature and effect of spiritual gifts: “The effect of the operation of a spiritual gift is to improve a person in his spirit’s enjoyment of the life and love of God – to bless him, in other words.”

These gifts are discussed in four major passages: Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 4. The Romans passage reiterates the idea of how spiritual gifts function in the Body of Christ:

“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.”

No two passages have identical lists of gifts. The 1 Peter passage tends to categorize gifts into “speaking” gifts and “serving gifts

“Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides...”

What’s a Leader To Do?

The Ephesians passage is unique in that it appears to give the job description for leaders. It begins by listing seven things Christians have in common: *“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called — one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”*

After that he lists four gifts that are recognized as leadership gifts: apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers.

¹¹ *“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,* ¹² *to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up*

¹³ *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.* ¹⁴ *Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.*

¹⁵ *Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things*

grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Can you spot the job description for leaders? (hint: it’s in verse 12) “...to prepare God’s people for works of service.” Other versions translate the word “prepare” as “equip.” We tend to think that leaders lead best when they’re doing all the serving. But according to this passage that’s not true. Leaders aren’t supposed to do all the serving themselves, they’re supposed to “prepare God’s people” to do the serving. They’re supposed to multiply themselves, like Jesus multiplied himself through training disciples, like Paul multiplied himself through Timothy and Timothy’s trainees.

You would think this would be clear, but it’s surprisingly difficult to get across. We have a Christian culture that has reinforced the idea that leaders do the ministry all by themselves. After all, that’s what they’re paid for, right? And frankly, it’s kind of nice to be admired for all the hard work they do. That’s where the old joke comes from: “ministers are paid to be good; everyone else is just good for nothing.”

I had the opportunity to teach some of these principles to leaders and pastors in Romania several years ago. We tried to communicate the concept that leaders should devote a considerable portion of their time to mentoring and training others to do the ministry. Often we were met with blank stares. When we asked what they were thinking, they often replied, “But I don’t have time for that; I’m too busy.” “Can’t we do the ministry better than lay people? After all, we’ve been trained to do it!” It was tough for them to see the clear teaching of Ephesians 4 – that the ministry is not for leaders only – it’s for everyone. And only when everyone is involved is the ministry really happening the way it should. And the only way to get everyone involved is if leaders devote themselves to discipling the members of the body and delegating ministry to them.

My wife and I once took about 15 single people to Colorado to backpack for a week in the San Juan mountains outside of Creede. Most of us were green – no, very green – and all we brought were boots and hiking clothes. We had no provisions and very few skills that would keep us alive in the wilderness. Thankfully, when we arrived there were very competent guides whom we hoped would stick with us and protect us from harm. The first thing they had us do was to sit in a huge circle, and then they brought in tons of equipment — canteens, sleeping bags, flies, tents, cooking gear, food — and spent the next hour sitting with each of us and parceling out the exact items we would need for the coming week’s trip. At the end of that hour we each had been equipped – we had a backpack full of expertly chosen provisions, tailored to our unique abilities. I remember thinking: *this is what I’m supposed to do.* Maybe I’ve been given special training, but I’m not just supposed to use that training to do ministry on my own – I’m supposed to equip others to do it. Only together are we a functioning body. As Ephesians teaches: “the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

How Do I Find My Spiritual Gifts?

I asked this question of a retreat speaker when I was a young Christian. His answer encouraged me and guided my thinking. He said that I may have one or more gifts, probably a unique mix of gifts that fits me. They were given to me when I came to Christ, but it takes time to discover and develop them. As Ray Stedman wrote, "It is helpful to realize that hardly anyone discovers all his gifts at the beginning of his Christian experience. Gifts, like talents, may lie undiscovered for years and then a certain combination of circumstances may bring them to light. It is wise, therefore, to be always ready to try something new."

This man encouraged me to try a variety of ministry opportunities, and to be careful not to "sign up" for too long in any one of them. The church is littered with casualties – people who volunteer for something and then feel too guilty to back out when they sense it's not something they enjoy or should be doing. Some people even leave a church because they're too shy to stop teaching a class! But while I'm searching for my best ministry "fit" it makes sense to try lots of different things.

Secondly, he told me to lean towards things I enjoy. I was surprised at that. I secretly assumed that ministry should be really hard; that if I actually enjoyed doing it then it didn't "count" – it wasn't enough of a sacrifice. That was sick thinking. God is not out to make us miserable, believe it or not! Sure, ministry often requires time and commitment and hard work, but in the end it should be something we love doing and that others enjoy.

Thirdly, as I get involved in different ways of serving, the Spirit will slowly but surely guide me towards those areas that fit me best. I can look at that as my "major" in life, like I "majored" in history in history or math. Now, I still needed to take lots of other courses in school. And in the same way, God wants us to serve in all different areas, even though my "major" – my gifts – may not be in those areas. Example: I may not have the gift of evangelism, but God still wants me to share my faith. I may not be gifted in mercy, but I can still show up at a hospital and show love to someone who's recovering from surgery. My gifts are simply areas of ministry that I should gravitate to over a lifetime of service.

Finally, I may have the same gift as yours, but it will probably look different. Two people may have the gift of evangelism: one uses it in stadiums (Billy Graham), the other shares Christ with friends at Starbucks. Two people are teachers: one is a professor and writes bestsellers, while the other shares biblical insights as a home group leader. Two people are gifted in mercy: one is Mother Teresa, the other loves to pray with hurting people in her church. First Corinthians 12:4-6 beautifully describes this principle:

"There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same Lord. God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us." (NLT)

Let's sum things up one last time:

1. We grow when we apply what we've learned.
2. We grow when we focus on others and seek to meet their needs.
3. We grow when we step out of our comfort zone and learn to trust God.
4. We grow when we use the gifts God has given us to express His love to others.

Recommended Reading

- [Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them](#), by John Ortberg
- [Life Together](#), by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- [Body Life](#), by Ray Stedman
- [Upside Down: The Paradox of Servant Leadership](#), by Stacy Rinehart
- [The Master Plan of Evangelism](#), by Robert Coleman

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