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many.

Sermon Brief
Text: 1 Cor. 12:27-31
Title: Many Gifts
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Seeking to faith-
fully proclaim
the whole coun-
cil of God in
scripture!



INTRODUCTION

Today I want to begin a multi-part series of sermons on the general topic of spiritual gifts. Most of the month of June will be devoted to exploring this theme as it surfaces inside the New Testament. The discussions are found mainly in the writings of the apostle Paul with a little emphasis in 1 Peter.

Today we look at 1 Cor. 12:27-31:

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.¹

This passage serves as a 'bridge' text linking together a larger discussion in chapters twelve through fourteen of First Corinthians. Parts of it allude back to the beginning discussion in verses one through twenty-six. And parts of it allude to the subsequent discussion in chapters thirteen and fourteen. In First Corinthians, the discussion of spiritual gifts covers chapters twelve through fourteen. So this text is a good way to get into the topic.

Why do we need to talk about spiritual gifts? From the negative side, there's a huge amount of theological garbage floating around in commentaries etc. about spiritual gifts. Most of it reflects interpretive nonsense that has been developed completely apart from scripture and then super imposed down on to the biblical text as though this were what the Bible teaches. Over the years of reading a lot of this literature and discussing -- sometimes debating -- with advocates of some of this stuff, I have been amazed at how much dependency there is on modern western rationalism as the foundation for the various views about gifts. And yet most of the advocates of this stuff decry rationalism as but another word for humanism. And both terms in their thinking are evil and of the Devil. Yet Rationalism has served as their master for interpreting the biblical texts.

On the positive side, we are moving toward a ministering congregation where every person in our church has a ministry responsibility. In order to do ministry well, we must utilize the gifts for ministry that God has granted to us individually and collectively as a church. Thus awareness of the biblical teaching on spiritual gifts is vitally important for us to become a ministering congregation using the various gifts from God to serve Him.

Let's see what Paul can teach us about spiritual gifts.

BODY

I. Unity, v. 27

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

12.27 Ὑμεῖς δέ ἐστε σῶμα Χριστοῦ καὶ μέλη ἐκ μέρους.

Analogy of the human body underscores the importance of each part. Here Paul speaks of the Corinthians as the 'body of Christ.' This means that together the believers in the different house church groups over the city of Corinth represented Christ's body in the city of Corinth. The meaning of the image is primarily to stress the presence of Christ. The visible manifestation of the resurrected Christ is seen in the believing community at Corinth. When the lost world looks for indications of who Jesus is they should be able to see that by looking at the Christians in the city. The church is Christ's body, His visible presence on earth. And one should not forget that Christ stands as the head of the body (ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος).² This image stresses

¹12.27 Ὑμεῖς δέ ἐστε σῶμα Χριστοῦ καὶ μέλη ἐκ μέρους. 12.28 καὶ οὓς μὲν ἔθετο ὁ θεὸς ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ πρῶτον ἀποστόλους, δεύτερον προφήτας, τρίτον διδασκάλους, ἔπειτα δυνάμεις, ἔπειτα χαρίσματα ἰαμάτων, ἀντιλήψεις, κυβερνήσεις, γένη γλωσσῶν. 12.29 μὴ πάντες ἀπόστολοι; μὴ πάντες προφῆται; μὴ πάντες διδασκαλοὶ; μὴ πάντες δυνάμεις; 12.30 μὴ πάντες χαρίσματα ἔχουσιν ἰαμάτων; μὴ πάντες γλώσσαις λαλοῦσιν; μὴ πάντες διερμηνεύουσιν; 12.31 ζηλοῦτε δὲ τὰ χαρίσματα τὰ μείζονα. Καὶ ἔτι καθ' ὑπερβολὴν ὁδὸν ὑμῖν δεικνυμι.

²Cf. Eph. 1:22-23, "22 And he has put all things under his feet and has made *him the head over all things for the church*, 23 *which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*" (NRSV); Eph. 4:15-16, "15 But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into *him who is the head, into Christ*, 16 *from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part*

Christ as the source of life for the church. Our existence comes from Him; our direction stems from His will. Thus when people look for Christ they can find Him in the church.

This is the correct understanding of Paul's use of the image of 'body' here. It stands in distinction from the traditional Roman Catholic view that the Catholic Church is the body of Christ and each parish church is a member of that body. That's an interesting idea, but it has no basis in scripture what so ever. And represents a corruption of the idea of the church as the body of Christ in the teachings of the New Testament. Even the common Protestant view of the 'universal church' as the Body of Christ cannot be maintained on scriptural grounds from passages like this one. All too often this very fuzzy concept of some sort of universal church made up of Christians is set forth as a foundational concept for ecumenical emphasis. All of that may have some value, but such thinking cannot be legitimately derived from scripture. And clearly this was not what Paul had in mind in 1 Cor. 12:27.

What Paul is getting at with the image of body here is an emphasis on unity or togetherness. This statement in verse twenty-seven summarizes the preceding discussion in verses 4-26,³ particularly verses 14-26. Divisiveness was a major problem among the believers at Corinth. They had divided over their favorite preacher (cf. 1:10-17). This spirit of factionalism produced jealousy and quarreling (cf. 3:3), elitism (cf. 4:6), taking one another to court over trivial matters (cf. 6:16). It surfaced worst around the Lord's Supper table (11:17-22) where their divisions stood particularly offensive to God. Thus we are not surprised by their divisiveness over the ideas of spiritual gifts. In their thinking some gifts were better than others, and to possess these gifts elevated one to a higher spiritual level than the rest.

Thus Paul's emphasis is on the sense of belonging that every believer should feel as a part of the body of Christ. "You are collectively Christ's body," Paul declares and then goes on to assert, "you are individual members of that body." Implicit in this that every member is important to the body, just as he earlier said explicitly (cf. 12:12): "just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." No member of the body of Christ is unimportant to Christ. Every member of the body of Christ has a contribution to make. And the body doesn't work well unless everyone is contributing their part.

What does this have to do with us at IBC Cologne? A whole lot! Since January we have been in a process of reorganizing our church to become a truly ministering congregation. The goal is to create a place of ministry for every single member of the church. God's church -- if it faithfully follows Christ -- is a congregation of ministers. I'm not talking about the pastor or youth pastor here. Every person in the church is called upon to serve Christ by ministering to others in some capacity or another. Our reorganization plan is gradu-

is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." (NRSV); Eph. 5:23, "For the husband is the head of the wife just as *Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior.*" (NRSV).

³1 Cor. 12:4-26 (NRSV): 4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

ally moving us that direction. By the time it is completed, every person in the church will have the possibility of finding his or her unique contribution to the church and to Christ. Let me indicate that I'm not going to be content with any of you just coming on Sunday and warming a bench during the worship service. I fully expect everyone to be committed to serving Christ in the church.

What verse twenty-seven underscores is that every one of you is a valuable member of the Body of Christ. Every single one of you has a contribution to make. Every one of you is gifted of God to make that contribution. God expects from each one of you a commitment to serve Him as minister reaching out to help others both inside and outside the church. No one is exempt from service. Not one person can plead an excuse of being too busy or without ability to do anything. Paul makes it clear in this verse as a summary of verses four through twenty-six that all must serve. And as we saw earlier from 1 Cor. 3:1-23, an accounting day lays ahead where each one of us will stand before God in Final Judgment to give account of our service to Him. But beyond that day is the joy of service and of expressing our love and gratitude to Christ for all that He has done for us. We owe Him our all; we must give Him our very best. Nothing less than that will suffice.

II. Different gifts, vv. 28-30

28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

12.28 καὶ οὓς μὲν ἔθετο ὁ θεὸς ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ πρῶτον ἀποστόλους, δεύτερον προφήτας, τρίτον διδασκάλους, ἔπειτα δυνάμεις, ἔπειτα χαρίσματα ἰαμάτων, ἀντιλήψεις, κυβερνήσεις, γένη γλωσσῶν. 12.29 μὴ πάντες ἀπόστολοι; μὴ πάντες προφῆται; μὴ πάντες διδάσκαλοι; μὴ πάντες δυνάμεις; 12.30 μὴ πάντες χαρίσματα ἔχουσιν ἰαμάτων; μὴ πάντες γλώσσαις λαλοῦσιν; μὴ πάντες διερμηνεύουσιν;

In verses twenty-eight through thirty, we find one of the many listings of spiritual gifts that are described in the New Testament.

What are 'spiritual gifts'? To be sure, Paul doesn't use the precise term in these verses, but in the 'header' at verse one that introduces the larger discussion of spiritual gifts in chapters twelve through fourteen the term, "**Now concerning spiritual gifts,**" (Περὶ δὲ τῶν πνευματικῶν), is used. In vv. 4-11,⁴ Paul uses the term Διαιρέσεις δὲ χαρισμάτων ("**varieties of gifts**") to describe the gifts. The better translation of Διαιρέσεις is "**apportionments.**" The point is that the capacity to serve is defined by what the Holy Spirit has 'apportioned out' to individual believers in their conversion. These gifts are a "manifestation of the Spirit" (ἡ φανέρωσις τοῦ πνεύματος) according to Paul. This is something given to us from God, an enabling blessing from God for service. In other words, God takes the talents He invested in us at birth, our interests and skills developed over our life, and pulls all of this into an 'enablement' for service that comes through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who came to live in us at conversion. There's no 'second blessing' etc. We received everything needed at conversion. Our challenge is the demand for obedience to follow the guidance of God's Spirit to plug into ministry that He leads us to.

The example of Paul in his missionary journeys provides the key to understanding that. In Acts 16:6-10 we discover how that works:

6 They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7 When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; 8 so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 9 During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Paul and Silas were seeking, as missionaries, to proclaim the gospel initially thinking that God wanted them to go westward from Galatia to Ephesus. After heading out along one of the major trade routes leading to Ephesus, the Holy Spirit made it clear that that wasn't the right direction. So they turned north and headed to Bithynia but again this wasn't the direction God wanted them to go. But the third time they found the open door in the province of Mysia to go to the city of Troas. There God used a vision of a man from Macedonia

⁴ 1 Cor. 12:4-11 (NRSV): **4** Now there are **varieties of gifts**, but the same Spirit; **5** and there are **varieties of services**, but the same Lord; **6** and there are **varieties of activities**, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. **7** To each is given **the manifestation of the Spirit** [ἡ φανέρωσις τοῦ πνεύματος] for the common good. **8** To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, **9** to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, **10** to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. **11** All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

to make it clear to Paul that they were to cross over into Europe with the gospel message. On October 29, 1922, the pastor of the Riverside Baptist Church in New York City, Harry Emerson Fosdick, preached one of his most famous sermons from this text. The sermon is titled, "Handling Life's Second-Bests." Dr. Fosdick captured the essence of Paul's discovery of God's will and leadership from this depiction by Luke in Acts 16. Several insights come from this text. Paul and Silas didn't sit around waiting for God to show them what to do. Rather, they stepped out in ministry at hand probing and testing which direction they needed to go. At the moment they needed further direction, God through the Holy Spirit made that direction known to them so they could follow it. Ultimately it took two 'closed doors' before the right door opened for them. God knew all along where He wanted them to go, but it took the 'trial and error' experience of traveling through central Turkey for Paul and Silas to discover that will of the Heavenly Father. This was an experience over a period of several weeks, and perhaps of months. And as they sought God's direction, they were faithfully serving with each opportunity that came along.

We can't sit back to 'find our gifts.' Such an attitude is mistaken and false. We discover "in ministry" what works and what doesn't work for us. We must remain open to God's leading from one place to another. Closed doors are an inherent part of discovering God's will and leadership. But always we remember that a closed door is the promise of another open door at the right moment and place of ministry.

What is 'your gift'? You will never discover it by some kind of 'spiritual inventory check list.' Knowing what God wants you to do is not an intellectual exercise. It is a submersion in ministry discovery. Find a need that looks attractive and plunge into ministry meeting that need. God will show you 'underway' whether this is the right place or not. But the discovery comes from being 'on the playing field,' not from sitting in the stands as a spectator waiting for some kind of 'revelation.'

What gifts are possible for ministry? A short observation is appropriate here. Through out the New Testament five passages speak of spiritual gifts.

1 Cor. 12:28-30

28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

1 Cor. 12:4-11

4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Rom. 12:1-8

1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect. 3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you 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 not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Eph. 4:7-16

4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. 7 *But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.* 8 Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." 9 (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) 11 The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of

the full stature of Christ. **14** We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. **15** But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, **16** from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

1 Pet. 4:7-11

7 The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. **8** Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. **9** Be hospitable to one another without complaining. **10** Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. **11** Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

Two observations surface immediately from a comparison of these passages:

- 1) *The various listings contain different gifts*
- 2) *The gifts complement one another for the common good of the church*

One cannot put these lists into a common basket with the assumption that together they comprise a comprehensive listing of all the possibilities. This is a false implementation of modern rationalism down on to the text that ignores the contextual setting of each passage. There is a randomness to the listings strongly pointing to the reality of each situation being addressed had different needs. From this one can legitimately draw the conclusion that every church had distinct needs, and each passage attempts to speak to the individual needs by the different churches. To be sure, some commonality among the lists is found, and this underscores the commonality among the various congregations. Some needs for ministry are basic to every church. But the differences in the list underscore the distinctiveness of each of these congregations as well.

What do we make of this for our church today? I believe just this. Our church, although we share many things in common with other congregations, has unique needs that are not found in other congregations. We are way more diverse culturally and ethnically than the vast majority of congregations in Cologne. That creates unique needs in our church. We are more diverse than most IBC churches even, thus setting us apart even from many of our sister IBC congregations. Our diversity is unique. No other congregation either in our city or in the IBC has the same composition of people from the same set of backgrounds. All that to say that we are special and different.

From my reading of these texts, I believe they are saying to us just this. God has put already inside our diverse membership people with the complementing spiritual gifts necessary for us to do the work of ministry that our church is called to do. We have the people we need to become a truly ministering church, the one that God wants us to be. Our challenge is to enlist every person in our church to ministry, to the using of their 'giftedness' from God. As we pool our gifts we can find the specific ministry directions we need to take as a church. The existing talents and gifts define our ministries. Then as God wants us to branch out in new directions, He will raise up new talents and will bring into our church individuals with the right gifts so that we can follow God's leadership in new ministries.

My people, God has supplied us today with what we need in order to be serving Him right now the way He wants us to. We must find ways to unleash the gifts of our members so that we can be all that we need to be as a church. This is at the heart of the reorganization of the church that is taking place at the moment. We are passionately seeking to address the opportunities for ministry that are possible with the people God has put in our church today.

III. Better gifts, v. 31

31 But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

12.31 ζηλοῦτε δὲ τὰ χαρίσματα τὰ μείζονα.

In this final verse Paul points beyond specific ministry gifts to something more important. Although a variety of interpretations of this verse have surfaced over time, the understanding that makes more sense to me is simply this. Chapter thirteen discusses the greater gifts of faith, hope, and love. These represent the common gifts needed by everyone. Of course, central to these is the gift of love.

All our talents, all our giftedness no matter how extensive is useless if these gifts of ministry are not expressed in the atmosphere of faith, hope and love. This was what was so missing at Corinth. Jealousy, elitism, divisiveness etc. was the atmosphere of their service to Christ. Consequently their ministry wasn't getting anywhere positive. All of their talents were being nullified by their failure to possess and utilize these 'greater gifts.'

People, we can have a church full of highly talented people, and be a complete flop as a congregation.

How we serve and minister is just as important as what we do in ministry. Paul makes this abundantly clear in chapter thirteen. In order to do effective ministry we must be a loving church, a believing church, a hoping church. In other words, our commitments to Christ must be strong and vibrant. Superficial commitment with little consistency of expression just won't get the job done.

I do believe that the amazing progress that we've already made is largely growing out of a strong commitment to service by a growing number of members in our church. God has done some absolutely astounding things in our church over the past several months. But we must not be content to just look back. There's much more ahead for us to do. So we're calling upon everyone to be strong in your faith. Rest confident in the hope of Christ that is given to us. And above all, be growing in your love for God and for one another. This way our spiritual giftedness can be mightily used by God.

CONCLUSION

Folks, God has gifted us as a church. By that I don't mean that we have lots of extraordinarily talented people in our church, even though that is true. What I do mean is that every person in this sanctuary as a child of God has been gifted by God. God has apportioned out to each of you a measure of His grace. And that gift of grace enables you to serve Him, and to contribute to the life of the church in a distinctive special way.

I challenge you today to offer yourselves to God for ministry and service. Let Him guide you into a place of service where God can use us to serve Him.