



Grace Gifts

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Romans 12:3-8

September 18, 2016



Justin Bieber, at the tender age of 22, is already an accomplished singer and songwriter. He has received numerous music awards. At last count, he has sold

100 million records and digital downloads. His name appears in the news for other things, also. He's been arrested numerous times for assorted indiscretions, shall we say.

Bieber also identifies himself to be a follower of Jesus. He says, "You don't have to go to church to be a Christian. If you go to Taco Bell, it doesn't make you a taco." I get his point. Going to church doesn't necessarily make someone a Christian any more than going to Taco Bell makes someone a taco. Bieber represents many in our day who ascribe to the "I'm spiritual but not religious" mantra. There are lots of Christians who profess allegiance to Christ yet disavow any association with the local church.

Americans are going to church less often these days, if at all. Recently, I read *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore* by Thom and Joanie Schultz. They have conducted hundreds of interviews over the years with people who don't go to church. They have identified four principal reasons why people don't go to church: *I feel judged. I don't want to be lectured. Church people are hypocrites. Church is irrelevant to my life.*

Perhaps the language of "going to church" tells us something. We commonly speak about going to church, but that's not the way the Bible talks about church. Scripture identifies Jesus' followers as the church. We don't go to church. We are the church. In the same interview I mentioned earlier,

Justin Bieber is right about one thing. “I think going to church is fellowship; it’s relationship.”

Last Sunday, we introduced a fall sermon series we are calling *Souls on Fire*. Our theme last week was loving God, from Romans 12:1-2. In these verses, Paul speaks about loving God with our entire selves as we “offer our bodies as living sacrifices” and our willingness to “be transformed by the renewal of our minds.” Today’s reading shifts *loving* God, in verses 1-2, to *servicing* God, in verses 3-8. Loving God leads to serving God.

In verse 3, Paul begins, “For by the grace given me, I say to you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but think of yourself with sober judgment” (12:3). Humility is a reoccurring theme in Romans. Paul cautioned us earlier, “Do not consider yourselves to be superior...Do not be arrogant...” (11:18-20).

I talked earlier about four reasons why people don’t identify with the church. The same couple who did the research puts forward four acts of love the



church can practice to counteract this trend. The first act, *gracious humility*, harkens back to Paul’s admonition in verse 3, about not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. The second act, *radical hospitality*, is the simple conviction that everyone is welcome here because nobody’s perfect. While we may not endorse what people do, we still accept people as having worth and dignity. Paul writes later in Romans, “Accept one another as Christ has accepted you” (15:7). The third act, *fearless conversation*, is

the willingness to have difficult conversations on hard issues, such as same sex marriage, transgender bathrooms and global warming. The fourth act, *divine anticipation*, is the belief that God was not only active in people's lives long ago in Scripture, but continues to be present and active in our lives today.

In verses 4-5, Paul likens the human body to the church. "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, though many, form one body and each member belongs to the others."

This body metaphor is a frequent theme in Paul's letters. You'll also find it mentioned prominently in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. We are one body made up of many members. Unity, however, doesn't mean uniformity. If there is no diversity, this body will be a monstrosity.



Paul concludes, "We have different gifts (charismata) according to the grace (charis) given to us" (12:6). This is now the second time in this passage where the word grace appears. Paul began with the words, "For by the grace given me" (12:3). I have retained two Greek words in verse 6: the word for *grace* (charis) and the word for gifts (charismata). Grace functions as the root word in this verse. Spiritual gifts are a by-product of God's grace. God's grace comes to full expression in the gifts God gives His people for service in the world.

Paul lists seven gifts in verses 6-8. Given that there are two other gift lists in Paul's letters that highlight different gifts, we can assume this list is meant to be illustrative but not exhaustive of the ways God gifts people for service.

There are, to my way of thinking, two general categories of gifts in verses 6-8. That's why I've listed them in two columns



on the screen. I would classify one group as out-front, speaking gifts. Prophecy, teaching and leadership are certainly in this category. The other four are behind-the-scenes, serving gifts. Serving, giving (generosity), encouraging and showing mercy all qualify as serving gifts.

At the outset of this passage, Paul directs his teaching about spiritual gifts “to every one of you” (12:3). Everyone means everyone. No one is excluded. Each of us has at least one gift, yet nobody has all the gifts. Beware of any church that relies too heavily on a few gifted people. Healthy churches depend on a mutual interdependence of everyone sharing their gifts.

A spiritual gift is not the same thing as a natural endowment. Spiritual gifts may work in and through our natural endowments, yet go beyond them. Spiritual gifts are supernatural capacities God has given us for service in the world.

I watched Denzel Washington's commencement address at Dillard University this week. Dillard University is

historically a black, liberal arts college located in New Orleans. As a seasoned actor, Denzel has appeared in over 30 feature films. He's a Tony award winner and the recipient of two Academy Awards. What I didn't know until this week is that Denzel is also a committed Christian.



In his graduation speech, Denzel recalls a time 41 years earlier when he was on the verge of flunking out of college. He happened to be visiting the beauty shop his mother was

managing. An African American woman, who was prominent in his parents' church (his dad was the pastor), was sitting under the hair dryer looking intently at Denzel. She asked Denzel's mom for a pen and paper. She scribbled the prophetic words on the paper, "You will travel the world and speak to millions," and handed it to Denzel.

Denzel identified this moment as a game-changer. He still carries this paper around with him. For the first time in his life, Denzel saw himself as gifted by God. From that moment forward, he began to live into this dream.

Denzel told these graduates, "Put God first. Put God first in everything you do. Everything I have achieved, everything I have is the result of the grace of God."

So what difference does this sermon on gifts make in my life?

If you are new to this church and things of faith, I invite you to open your life to God's greatest gift of salvation. Salvation is a gift we receive in faith. By receiving God's

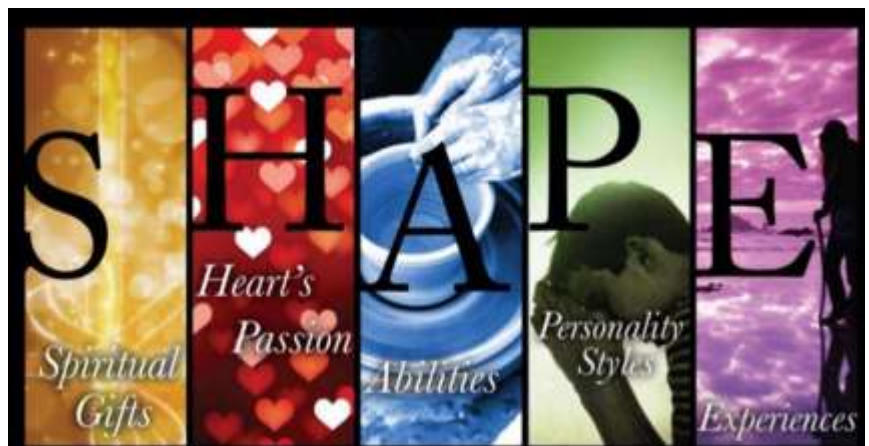
gift of forgiveness through the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins on the cross, we are forgiven and set free to use our gifts in Christ's service.

One of our central tasks as Christ-followers is to discover our gifts and put them to work. Some of you wonder about God's will for your life. Discovering your gifts could help you unlock God's will for your life. God's will is likely related to the gifts God has given you.

Some of you undervalue the gifts God has given you. You may think you don't have any gifts for use in ministry. You may conclude you don't have anything to contribute. Wrong! God has gifted every believer for use in God's service.

There's also a danger in the opposite direction. We can overestimate our gifts and come to regard them as our reward for good behavior. Wrong! Every spiritual gift is a grace gift.

On our website is a link to something called SHAPE. It's an acronym for the words: Spiritual gifts, Heart, Ability, Personality and



Experience. In other words, your SHAPE is a collection of these five factors. God has given us gifts, heart, ability, personality and experiences that make us uniquely qualified to serve God. Our task is to discover these gifts and put them to use.

In this SHAPE section of our website is a Spiritual Gifts Inventory you can take to help you in this discovery process. It takes 10-15 minutes to complete. It's a simple tool to help

identify where you have aptitude and skill for serving God. You can ask trusted friends for their assessment of your gifts. This doesn't have to be a self-serving inquiry if your ultimate purpose is to identify where you can most effectively serve God.

Let's return to Paul's metaphor of a body. Jesus is our head and we are his body. The elders and pastors of this church are not the head of this body. Christ is our head and we are members of his body. Membership in this church is identification with a local body of believers more than it is joining religious institution. God wants to mobilize this body for service in the world. Know your gifts. Use them.

As members of this body, we belong to each other. We help each other. We need each other. Keep these ambitions central and people will be drawn to this church.

We've been talking about renewal in this church for this past year. As I said last Sunday, *renew* is a word that literally means "to make new again." God wants to make us new again. Renew me. Renew my family. Renew my church for service in the world. Set our souls on fire.

