

Community of Service

I Peter 4:10-11

Scripture

1 Peter 4:10-11 ¹⁰ As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: (ESV) ¹¹ 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, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. (NIV)

Main Idea

Background

John Calvin had a perceptive insight on how the distribution of spiritual gifts in the church is one way God creates community in the body of Christ:

"But this consideration is also very important, that the Lord hath so divided his manifold graces, that no one is to be content with one thing and with his own gifts, but every one has need of the help and aid of his brother. This, I say, is a bond which God hath appointed for retaining friendship among men, for they cannot live without mutual assistance. Thus it happens, that he who in many things seeks the aid of his brethren, ought to communicate to them more freely what he has received. This bond of unity has been observed and noticed by heathens. But Peter teaches us here that God had designedly done this, that he might bind men one to another."
(Calvin's Commentary on 1 Peter)

Focus

This lesson is designed to help your group 1) understand the nature and purpose of spiritual gifts and 2) determine and/or affirm the spiritual gifts of each member.

Starters

- What has been the most rewarding service project/event that you've been a part of?

Discussion

Q1: Spiritual gifts are an often misunderstood reality of the Christian life. How does the idea of stewardship (def. of steward – a person who manages another's possessions for the owner's purposes/interest) help us better understand this reality?

A1: Many Christians view spiritual gifts in a self-serving manner. They are viewed as marks of super spirituality or signs that God has really blessed you. Other Christians think certain spiritual gifts should be sought as confirmation of your status as a Christian. Many believe that there is such a thing as spiritual gifts, but haven't gained an understanding of their spiritual gift(s). These perspectives are opposed to how the Scriptures present spiritual gifts.

The idea of spiritual gifts as stewardship keeps us from viewing spiritual gifts in a selfish manner and encourages us to use them, instead of ignore them. God has not given us spiritual gifts primarily for our own edification/growth but so that he can use us to edify and build into others. In some Christian circles, there is two-level Christianity (regular Christian and real/super Christian) based on whether you have/exercise certain spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are then made an individualistic mark of passing the test toward super Christianity. Many others see all this and think spiritual gifts are a bunch of nonsense for the charismatic. Like we said above, this is antithetical to the real purpose of these gifts. The truth is that Jesus has given us these gifts in order each one of us be channels of his grace to others.

These gifts give us opportunity to live out the gospel. The gospel tells us that the chief gift is the gracious gift of life found in Jesus. Jesus did not serve himself but us in order that we might receive

this gift, his service resulted in his death for our life. Now Jesus gives us gifts so that we would give ourselves freely, not for our own benefit, but for other's good and for the glory of God.

Q2: If it is true that God's grace is released in all its variety and colors* when EACH person is using their gifts to serve one another then...

1) What does this tell us about how important community is in receiving and experiencing God's grace? AND

2) Why do you think churches are so often filled with people who aren't serving?

(*Note: "varied" in verse 9 can be literally translated – "many colored")

A2: 1) As we've seen in different ways in each of the previous weeks, God's grace comes to us through his people. The concept of spiritual gifts helps us understand how important community for receiving and experiencing the grace of God. One important observation that doesn't come across well in English translations of the bible is that the word "spiritual gift" is actually a form of the same word for "grace". The word for "spiritual gifts" could be translated "graces" or "grace-endowments". These gifts are literally ways in which God channels his grace to His people and to the world. Jesus becomes present to us in his body – the church – when we are all devoted to using our gifts to serve others (Rom. 12:4-6 and I Cor 12). Spiritual gifts are how Jesus ministers grace to His people.

Since God doesn't give any one person all the gifts, we need the entire community exercising their gifts for a full experience of God's grace. Even in our particular area of gifting, we need others of the same gifting (i.e. if our gift is encouragement, we still need others to encourage us). This is the way God designed the body of Christ to work (I Cor. 12), in order that we would all learn what it means to love in humility (I Cor. 13).

Often we may gravitate toward churches which emphasize certain gifts – some go to churches that focus on teaching, some go to churches the focus on doing, some to churches that desire to see the spectacular gifts at work today. This is unfortunate because many of churches lack the full spectrum of "colors" due to a focus on only certain types of gifts.

2) There are a number of relevant answers here. Often, churches give off an aura that ministry is only for the professionals. In these churches one man or a staff of pastors do the entire work of the ministry. In other situations, people are encouraged to serve and use their gifts but they rely on the 'professionals' to actually do the work of the ministry (which is totally contrary to Eph. 4:12, 13). Another reason people aren't using their gifts is that people don't know 1) that they have a gift from Jesus for his body and 2) what that gift is.

The end result in all these scenarios is that the church is missing out on the full spectrum/the full variety of God's grace.

Q3. Peter tells us that the way in which we use our spiritual gifts is important. We should exercise these gifts in such a way "that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ". Why is this important and how can we tell if we aren't using our gifts for this ultimate purpose?

A3: This is important because it is possible for a community to become too focused on their individual gifts, comparing their gifts and using their gifts to bring glory and praise to themselves (this is what was happening in Corinth – 1 Corinthians 12-14). As with any gift that we receive from God (money, possessions, positions of authority and influence) we are tempted to view our spiritual gifts in selfish and prideful manner. The goal of the gift is to magnify the grace of the Giver. Our hope should be that people forget about our gifts or ministries and see more of God. That's hard to do for us – as we are often looking for validation and approval from others instead of from God Himself (the One who gave us our gifts!).

The second part of this question can be approached from a number of angles. I think the main way we can tell we aren't using our gifts for the glory and praise of God is if we aren't experiencing freedom and joy in our ministries. Another litmus test would be the lack of spiritual fruit and effectiveness. These aren't always indicators that we have lost sight of God's glory but when we see these things happening we should ask, "Why am I doing this?" "Am I hoping for the approval and honor of man more than seeking the glory of God?"

Q4: Verse 9 says that "each" Christian has received a gift—each of us is meant to be a channel of God's grace in some way. Many of us have a hard time identifying our spiritual gift(s) and are reluctant to serve because we aren't sure where we fit. Spend some time as a group helping each member identify their spiritual gift(s). Here's a few options on how to do this:

First, pray. Ask the Lord to specially guide this time of the group meeting to clarify everyone's gifts and calling in order that his grace might flow more abundantly to His people.

Second,

1) Have each spouse share the gift(s) they see in their partner. –OR–

2) As a whole group, put the gift "spotlight" on each member. As a group, share how this person has encouraged you or been a channel of God's grace in your life.

Third,

Allow each person to respond on whether they feel their gift(s) have been accurately identified.

Romans 12:3-8

prophecy

ministry

teaching

exhortation

giving

ruling

showing mercy

I Cor. 12:28-30

apostles

prophecy

teaching

miracles

healing

tongues

Interpreting
tongues

helping

Governing

1 Cor. 12:8-10

word of wisdom

word of knowledge

faith

healing

miracles

Prophecy

discerning of spirits

kinds of tongues

interpreting tongues

Ephesians 4:7-12

apostles

prophets

evangelists

pastor-teacher

A4: There are some important things you should keep in mind as the leader who is guiding this exercise:

1) the controversial status of certain gifts – certain miraculous gifts have become hot buttons of controversy in today's church. The gifts of healing, prophecy, apostleship and tongues have been emphasized by certain charismatic and Pentecostal groups as lacking in today's churches. They have called for an acknowledgement and practice of these spiritual gifts. Understandably, they have argued that we are missing out on God's grace if we neglect these gifts out of prejudice or suspicion.

Other churches understand these particular gifts as playing a foundation role (Eph. 2:20) in the early NT church. Since they had a special role in that era of God's work in history, they no longer are operative. It is argued that healing, tongues and prophecy were confirmatory gifts (Heb. 2:3). In other words, they confirmed the authentic teachers/apostles of the early church in order that

people would know they spoke with God's authority. When the NT books were finished being written, there was no longer a need for these gifts of confirmation. The Word of God in the Old and New testaments becomes the standard of authority and teachers/churches are tested by the message it contains.

2) the representative nature of the gift lists – You may have noticed that these lists are all different! No need to worry. What we learn from this is that these gift lists were not meant to be exhaustive lists of every single spiritual gift. But they are representative – they show us the types of gifts or the categories of gifts God gives His people. We have to be cautious when adding gifts that are very different than those in the lists we have in Scripture. We need to use the entire bible for wisdom when trying to discern whether a particular talent or ability is indeed a spiritual gift (the spiritual gifts of telepathy, juggling, and kickboxing don't make the cut). I Peter gives us the two broad categories of speaking and serving.

3) the purpose of spiritual gifts – to be channels of God's grace for His glory. We've spent a lot of time talking about this in the rest of the study but remember their purpose!

For further reference:

The key passages on spiritual gifts are Romans 12:3-8, I Cor. 12 and 13, Ephesians 4:1-6 and our current passage I Peter 4:10, 11.

Prayer

Hopefully, you've had some success in identifying your spiritual gifts. Use this time of prayer to ask God to use each member of the group to be a channel of His grace. If some are uncertain about their spiritual gifts, pray that God would make this clearer. If some don't know how to go about using their gifts, pray that God would provide wisdom. If some are using their gifts currently, pray that God would bless their ministries. And remember to pray that we would all see the full spectrum of God's grace and, in response, praise him more wholeheartedly.