

October 9, 2011

Part 3 of a 4-Part Series on how to discover your spiritual gifts and how to use them for the glory of God and in service to others.

Ephesians 4: 1-7, 11-16

For Me? Wow!!

What was the best gift you ever got? Was it jewelry? A big, new tv? Maybe a car? Or a trip?

Or maybe it was the bike you got for Christmas when you were a kid. Or even younger-----a toy fire truck or the most beautiful doll ever?

Did you ever receive an unexpected gift? When it wasn't your birthday or Christmas, or even Valentine's Day?

Have you ever been handed a beautifully wrapped gift for no reason at all except that the person giving it to you loves you?

And then when you opened it, it was just the most amazing gift ever? What you wanted most in the world?

And you couldn't say anything else but "For me?? WOW!!!"

The spiritual gifts are like that. God gives them to us for no reason except God loves us. And they are not some trinkets from the 99 cent store! God gives good gifts!

The only difference about spiritual gifts is that they don't just get handed to us.

It's kind of like a treasure hunt. We have to find the clues and follow the trail on our journey of discovery.

Along the way, we might find the gifts that are for someone else, and we have to know that they are not for us.

Sometimes we might be able to hand them on to the person they belong to.

For instance, I might find the gift of caring for creation's little ones, and I would know it's not for me, because even though I do care, it's not my priority--- it's not my deepest passion. And so I would give that gift to Liz and Jean.

And then I might find a gift filled with beautiful music, and even though I appreciate music very much, it's not what I do best, so I give it to Michael and Jessiel and Bob and others for whom music is something exceptional, something that they use to share the glory of God with others.

One way that we discover our spiritual gifts is that someone else sees them in us and tells us about them.

So part of the Journey of Discovery is to listen to other people. When someone tells you that you have a gift in some area, do you dismiss the comment? Or do you “ponder it in your heart”?

This does come with a warning, though. Because sometimes a person might use the term “gift” in kind of a frivolous way, a way that just means you’re good at it, but not necessarily exceptional.

And you might be really good at something and yet it is not your passion. It’s not where your heart is.

And so you take the comment in and consider it, but the answer to the question, “Is this your gift?” is deep inside your soul, where God put that gift.

And so another leg of the Journey of Discovery is to know yourself really well, to know what it is that brings you the most joy and the deepest fulfillment.

And the way to get to know yourself better is to think back over your life and think about things that you did that made you the happiest or things you heard about that you have always told yourself “I have to do that someday!”

Then ask yourself, what was it about that particular time in your life or what is it about that particular activity that draws you to it? What is it down in your heart that makes certain things so attractive to you,

that those actions or circumstances bring you so much satisfaction and fulfillment? What have you done in your life that you wish you could relive or do over and over again.

I'm not talking about wonderful vacations or things you enjoy at that level. I'm talking about things that you have accomplished, things you did that made you glow from the inside out, times when you felt your heart on fire with passion for what you were doing.

Times when you felt that something was exactly the right thing for you to be doing, maybe something you felt chose you instead of you choosing it. Times in your life when you felt the most at home, like you really truly belonged, like this is the reason you are alive!

That is a huge clue to finding your spiritual gifts, because God put that passion, that fulfillment, that attraction to doing that particular thing into your heart to guide you on your Journey.

Another thing to consider is what talents you have.

Now, gifts are different from talents. A talent is something you might use for your own purposes---to make money, to please someone else, or just because it's easy for you. It's something that you were born with.

A spiritual gift, on the other hand, is something God gives, maybe when you're quite young, but maybe not until you're older. And it's always used in service to God, and for God's glory in service to others.

Despite the differences, our talents can be a clue to discovering our gifts. Many times, it's all in how you use your talents.

When I watch shows like “America’s Got Talent” or “The X Factor” and I see so many people who really do have talent, I am impressed. I enjoy watching and listening to good performers.

I even enjoy some of the less talented people to some degree. I laugh or I admire them for having the nerve to get on tv and do something weird or dangerous. And it’s just a moment’s entertainment.

But when someone has a gift, it hits me differently. Something in my heart is touched and I know I have been changed by the experience of seeing them share their talents.

That's a gift---to be able to make a difference in the world in some way.

And to recognize that gift in yourself and then to say yes to using it for God's purposes----that's when you have found the place where you belong. You have discovered the plan that God has for you---and as the prophet Jeremiah says, that plan is to give you hope and a future.

But maybe you have a talent for music, and that's not where your heart lies. Yes, it's a talent, but it's not your gift. Keep looking, keep searching your past and your heart, because I am sure there's something there that is a key to finding your gift. Your talent may be music, but your gift is something else, something that brings you closer to God.

While talents can be clues, it's also possible that you have been gifted by God in a way that we don't think of as talents.

I am thinking about gifts such as encouraging, serving, helping. Maybe you find a satisfaction in encouraging others in some way. Maybe watching others reach their goals with the help of your encouragement is what brings you greater joy than anything else in life!

Maybe taking care of little children while their parents work is where your heart is. That might be several gifts together---encouraging and serving the parents and nurturing the little ones as they learn and grow. The gift of teaching might be a very big part of that as well.

Think about your experiences---what you have done and what you are doing, and your life just might lead you to where your gifts are.

So we have clues from other people telling us what gifts they see in us.

And we have clues from our own experiences.

What other clues are there as we travel on our journey to discover our gifts?

Well, consider your resources. I am not talking about money here. I am talking about things like where you are, how much time you have, and the stage of life you are in.

I want to use an example from my own life here. When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in August 2005, I watched the news coverage hour after hour. That in itself was not a gift. Many people did the same thing.

But days later I finally turned away from the tv and I knew I had to go help.

That was a gift from God.

But while I wanted to pack up and go right away, the school year was starting. It was my second year of seminary. I had something else I had to do, so I didn't have the time right then, not to mention that

I had no idea what I would do or how I could possibly be of any help if I just took off and went to the Gulf Coast right then. I would just be in the way of the first responders.

The resources were not all in place for me to use the gift of compassion that God gave me for the people who had been impacted by the storm.

Resources are important, not only in finding our gifts, but in knowing how to use them.

So I waited, but that burning heart never died down.

And I prayed for the way to help Katrina victims.

Five months later, I heard that my church was planning a mission trip to Mississippi to help rebuild houses. Eight months later, I was there. I had the time, miraculously I had the money, and I had the instruction and the structure I needed to make a difference to people in Mississippi.

God had given me a gift of helping and compassion and then had given me the resources to use that gift.

After the first trip in 2006, my heart did not stop burning. I had to wait a few more years and then once again, God provided the resources for me to help in Mississippi----the money, the people, the structure.

And not just once, but twice! And I know that the fire in my heart has lit a fire in some of yours.

And I am grateful beyond words.

And this leads me to say something I hadn't quite thought of until this week----that one evidence of a spiritual gift is that it spreads----maybe not the same gift, but if I share my gift, it helps you find yours.

And maybe that's why when someone tells you that you have a gift, it carries more credibility if that person themselves has a gift. Maybe their gift is actually to see the gifts that other people have.

There is another way to find your spiritual gifts, actually sort of a common way, so maybe you already know about it, and that way is using a spiritual gifts inventory. This is a kind of questionnaire that can have different formats, but a common one is to ask you to rank a number of statements with regard to how true those statements are for you.

Statements like "I can learn foreign languages easily."

And

“When I see someone in need, I stop what I am doing and help them.”

After completing all the questions, you score the results and find your spiritual gifts. Most of these questionnaires show you what your primary gift is and then also two or more secondary gifts.

The problem is that if you rely on a spiritual gifts inventory alone, your results might not be accurate because you might wish certain things are true for you or something might be worded oddly and so you choose an inappropriate answer.

And that's why you need these other measures---the input of other people, events in your life, and talents and resources---to help affirm what the inventory says.

And that's one reason that I'm not just going to hand out inventories to everyone.

The other reason is very important as well.

Without the other information, it is very easy to make a mistake in figuring out how to serve using those gifts.

Suppose the Spiritual gifts inventory tells you that you have the gift of teaching, so you begin teaching Sunday School.

You take on the little kids, the primary grades.

And it's a terrible experience. You have no idea what to do with kids who are just learning to read, who don't want to sit still, who are beginners at all the Bible stories.

And so you give up in disgust, more confused than ever. Was the inventory wrong? And so you give up and refuse to serve in any way. It was a terrible experience that you don't care to repeat.

And actually, if you thought about it, you never much liked babysitting kids that age, but when you were about 30 you had the best time of your life going on a mission trip with high school kids. Maybe you should teach high school kids!

Do you see what I mean?

It's not the wrong gift. It's the wrong way to serve using that gift!

And that's why you need all of these methods to find your gifts.

Next week we will talk more about figuring out how to serve using your gifts. Until then, listen to people when they tell you what you're gifted at, think about your life experience and what you can learn from that, consider your talents and your resources.

What are your spiritual gifts? The answer is in your heart.

Let us pray.