

WHAT'S THE POINT?

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1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Prayer: *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen. (Ps 19:4)*

Do you remember from last week the story Pastor Keith shared about his friend Andy who listened to the Holy Spirit while having a conversation with someone during a flight? That was a pretty cool story. The part that stood out to me was that because Andy was in tune to the Holy Spirit, the man he was talking with experienced emotional healing! Wasn't that amazing how God showed up just at the right moment all because of Andy's obedience to God? I've heard so many stories such as this, and they all have that same amazement about them because they defy the odds stacked up against them. In these types of stories, when all signs point to defeat, God pulls through in one way or another to show up at the exact moment of need and declare victory in some form or fashion. PRAISE GOD!

How about this one from my own experience? Ten years ago, while still in grad school, I worked at the seminary library. During this particular time, I experienced one of those "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad" days. During that time, one of the students, who was finishing up his doctoral program at the Seminary, stopped in while I was there by myself and noticed something was wrong. He immediately pulled me aside and prayed with me, which gave me that extra "oomph" I needed to get through the rest of the day. That meant so much to me, and I never forgot how God showed up at the exact moment I needed him.

But that's not the part of the story to which I am referring. What is even more amazing is that earlier this year, the day before my brother passed, this man from the seminary, whom I had not seen in ten years, mysteriously walked by me in the hallway of The OSU James Cancer Center. I had to do a double take! I called out to him, and after a moment of jogging his memory, he sat with me and learned about why I was there. Turns out, he worked there as a chaplain! With concern and compassion, he offered condolences and then arrived at my brother's room to pray with our family. Again, it was one of the darkest hours of my life, when I desperately needed God to show up, and He did! What are the odds, right? The cherry on top was when this man said with a smirky smile, "You know, I never visited the library to actually use the library." I took this to mean that he was there for anyone in need, not just for his own need. Every. Single. Time. This is a true example of a messenger from God who followed the Holy Spirit's nudging exponentially. I certainly benefitted from it, and I'm sure he has touched many more lives in a similar way.

God is so good, isn't He? Scripture tells us He is amazing in every single way! And when used in relationship with the Holy Spirit inside us, our spiritual gifts we've been discussing over the past few weeks can truly reflect God's Lovingkindness, God's Agape, God's Love! Imagine what kind of "great power" we can be part of if we are able to partner with the Holy Spirit all the time!

And as much as I would love to leave it at that, I would be doing a disservice if I didn't share with you a bit of caution about these spiritual gifts. Remember that quote from one of those superhero movies several years ago, "With great power comes great responsibility"? Well, that doesn't entirely apply here because what we are talking about is much more complex than a one liner movie quote. But what does apply is that we must be careful about using these gifts with unhealthy motivations or without checking ourselves in areas of our lives where sin and temptation may be lurking. Let's take for instance, certain mainstream headlines about those in Christian leadership roles – whether it be pastors or worship leaders – who have crumbled under the weight of their sin. I don't even have to name them. I'm sure you could be thinking about some familiar stories already. The fallout from these scandals caused so much pain and trauma, not just in their own lives but in the lives of the ones who looked up to them. People trusted them to lead towards spiritual growth, not to lead them astray. It's heart wrenching to watch because it is difficult to see such a trusted and inspirational leader get taken down. The work of the devil, indeed.

But honestly, it's not all that different than what Paul was going through when he wrote to the Corinthians. As newly converted Gentile Christians in a busy and heavily populated city known for idolatry and immorality, the Corinthians were having some problems. So Paul stepped in to lend them a hand in the form of letters to clear up some of their confusion. First Corinthians 13 is an example of Paul's teaching. You might be familiar with it as it is used as a poetic inspiration piece in many weddings (including my own). If you want, you are welcome to read out loud with me. I will be reading from the English Standard Version.

READ: 1 Corinthians 13 (ESV)

13 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now

we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

It sounds lovely, doesn't it? Gives you all the warm fuzzies? Instructing couples how to treat each other with kindness and respect? Well, if you read this in relation to the context of what was happening in Corinth, I don't think Paul meant for this to be warm and fuzzy. Some of the Corinthians had learned about their spiritual gifts, but they were integrating their gifts into their corrupt society that was riddled with sin and immoral behaviors. They themselves struggled with idolatry and pride and immorality. Some of them were trying to outdo each other or win status with their spiritual gifts; showing off, if you will.

So for us, with our focus on learning about our own spiritual giftings, I'd like to invite you to join me in wrestling with a few questions that come to mind. Some have already been addressed in the past few weeks, but I will offer a refresher. 1. What are my gifts and how can I use them? 2. Am I cut out for this? Do I have what it takes to use my gifts the way God intended? 3. How do I avoid falling into the trap of misusing my gifts?

What are my gifts and how can I use them?

Over the past few weeks, we have all been invited to take a spiritual gifts inventory called S.H.A.P.E. This inventory is based out of Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in Southern California. The questions follow in line using the acronym SHAPE revealing five ways God has shaped you.

S – Spiritual Gifts: What has God supernaturally gifted me to do?

H – Heart: What do I have passion for and love to do?

A – Abilities: What natural talents and skills do I have?

P – Personality: Where does my personality best suit me to serve?

E – Experiences: What experiences (spiritual, painful, educational, ministry) have I had?

If you took the inventory, either online or on paper, your scores could have shown up in any of the following areas:

A = Administration/Organization

B = Apostleship/Missionary (Church-planting)

C = Craftsmanship

D = Creative Communication

E = Discernment

F = Encouragement/Exhortation

G = Evangelism

H = Faith

I = Giving

J = Helps/Service

K = Hospitality

L = Intercession

M = Knowledge

N = Leadership

O = Mercy
P = Prophecy/Preaching
Q = Shepherding/Pastorship

R = Teaching
S = Wisdom

In looking back at what we've learned about spiritual gifts, we now know that number one, you must use your gifts in connection with the Holy Spirit that dwells within you. Paul makes this clear in Corinthians chapter 12 by referencing the phrases, *"the same Spirit"*, *"the one Spirit"* and *"the same Lord"*.

Number two, you must use your gifts as part of one body as we discussed last week. It would be awfully difficult for your gifts to be effective if your gift was the only one out there in the world. I remember being part of a church some years ago that put an event together which included one of the members using her artistic gift of painting. She had a blank canvas in front of her at the start of the service and began painting what seemed to be just random splotches and smears. Until we reached the end of the service and she was able to turn the canvas upside down to reveal a profile picture of Jesus with a crown of thorns. It was so moving, you could feel the presence of the Holy Spirit within that service, and I'm pretty sure several people came to know Jesus from that experience. What we didn't see, and what I later found out was that the artist had some serious doubts before the service and almost talked herself out of doing it. Can you imagine the emptiness of that service without that big reveal? Now I'm not discounting the other parts to the service such as the choir, the different speakers, and others. But there was something about this artist who was in the background minding her own business only to reveal something so precious which tied the entire service together and bring unity to the body of Christ.

The third lesson to be learned, and that which I will discuss further is that without Love, AGAPE Love, it all means nothing!

Am I cut out for this? Do I really have what it takes to use my gifts the way God intended?

This is where MY spiritual gift of Encouragement comes in...YES! Because you are uniquely and beautifully made in God's own image. I like how Eugene Peterson worded Psalm 139:14-16 in The Message:

"Oh yes, you shaped me first inside, then out; you formed me in my mother's womb. I thank you, High God—you're breathtaking! Body and soul, I am marvelously made! I worship in adoration—what a creation! You know me inside and out, you know every bone in my body; You know exactly how I was made, bit by bit, how I was sculpted from nothing into something. Like an open book, you watched me grow from conception to birth; all the stages of my life were spread out before you, The days of my life all prepared before I'd even lived one day."

Ephesians 2:10 states, *"For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago."*

You may say things about some of your downfalls. Things that you might not do so well. But remember Moses who pleaded with God to find someone else to do the mighty work he was being asked to do? Moses worried that he didn't have the skills to speak to God's people. So God sent Aaron to handle that area of expertise. SEE? We are one Body! God will find a way to get His message across. We just have to be willing to be used in that manner and move out of our own way so that God can get to work.

How do I avoid falling into the trap of misusing my gifts?

Let's talk about this because I think this is the pinnacle of what Paul was trying to relay to the Corinthians. If we look back at the beginning of the book of First Corinthians, Paul is calling them out. He talks about their cognitive dissonance (HAHA – I get to use a clinical term!) - when one's actions conflict with one's beliefs, ideas or values.

1 Corinthians 1:10-11

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹ My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.

The rest of the book describes various areas of quarrel and how to overcome them. Paul's reason for bringing up spiritual gifts in chapter 12 was that some of these silly Corinthians were caught boasting about the gifts they possessed. I can imagine them "one-upping" each other. "OH YEAH? WELL, MY GIFT IS BETTER THAN YOUR GIFT. I DID THIS AND THEY SAW ME DO THAT AND THEY WERE LIKE...WOW!"

So let's just refresh our memories with the Love chapter. Paul is calling out the specific conflicts he has heard about. Speaking in tongues, using the gift of prophesy, having understanding, knowledge and wisdom and faith that can move mountains means absolutely diddly squat (my words, not his) if Love is not present. The love Paul is talking about is the Agape Love. The kind of love that goes beyond the love of any human. The love that can only be used in connection with the Holy Spirit. Because without the Holy Spirit, there is no way a mere human can fathom the depth of the Love that is described here.

In order for us to not fall into the trap of misusing our gifts, we must tune into the Holy Spirit through prayer, meditation, reading scripture and any other way that you choose to connect with Him. Using your gifts without the Holy Spirit will only give you an empty return, like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

So... What's the point?

I'd like to remind you of Paul's claim in chapter 2 of First Corinthians.

¹⁰ these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. ¹³ This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. ¹⁴ The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. ¹⁵ The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, ¹⁶ for,

"Who has known the mind of the Lord

so as to instruct him?"

But we have the mind of Christ.

Can you imagine having the mind of Christ? If you're like me, I don't feel like I have the mind of Christ. I have my own mind. And if you ask my parents, I'm pretty stubborn and will do things my own way – even to my detriment sometimes. But because I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that I am saved and belong in the arms of Jesus through and through, I know that through all things, if I listen and tune in, I can certainly sense the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of Christ who lives in me and can help me formulate my thoughts and direct my actions to be in the likeness of Him. And THAT is something I can look forward to. I get to be a part of the bigger story. GOD'S story!

Now, can you imagine doing that without LOVE? There's No Way! The Holy Spirit IS Love! And we cannot be separated from God's LOVE – as Paul shares with the Romans in chapter 8:38-39:

³⁸ And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,^[a] neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. ³⁹ No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And THAT is the point!

AMEN!