

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 10, 2007

FOR THE COMMON GOOD

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

You and I were made for ministry. In the words of Rick Warren in *The Purpose Driven Life*, we were shaped for serving God. We were made not simply to receive and enjoy the blessings of God in our lives, but to be a blessing to others. Like Abraham back in Genesis 12, we have been blessed to be a blessing. Every one of us. Did you know that?

The Corinthians, God bless them, were really into the part about being blessed. They reveled in God's blessings. Some of them, apparently, took pride in how blessed they were, as if they – and not God – were the author and source of all their blessings. But many of them didn't quite grasp the part about being a blessing to others. Like the people of Israel in the Old Testament, they preferred to hoard their blessings. They were content to keep the blessings to themselves.

But this is not the way God intended it. Paul recognized that the Corinthians were in urgent need of sound instruction. They were in need of a corrected understanding, a revised perspective, concerning the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the application of those spiritual gifts to their lives as followers of Christ. So Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:1: "Now about spiritual gifts – about the ways God's Spirit gets worked into our lives (*The Message*) – I do not want you to be ignorant."

I think we need this sound instruction in the church today as much as the church in Corinth did. We need to understand what the Bible teaches about spiritual gifts if we are serious about living faithful, fruitful lives for the Lord Jesus Christ and serving God's purposes for us in this generation.

GIFT, FRUIT AND GIFTS

The first thing we need to understand is the difference between the *gift* of the Holy Spirit, the *fruit* of the Spirit, and the *spiritual gifts* of the Holy Spirit.

In Peter's message on the Day of Pentecost, in Acts 2:38, he said to the assembled crowd: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." In Ephesians 1:13-14, Paul wrote to the believers in Ephesus: "You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of His glory."

God the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity, comes to take up residence in our lives – not just to be with us but to live in us – when we repent of our sins and trust in the

saving work of Christ alone for our salvation. If you are a Christian, if you are a genuine follower of Christ, if you know and trust Christ as Savior and Lord of your life, you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has come to take up residence in your heart. As John Huffman points out, as you daily surrender your life to Christ and increasingly allow Him to be Lord of your life, you will have more and more of the fullness of the Holy Spirit. This is the *gift* of the Holy Spirit, which is the birthright of every person who comes to saving faith in Christ.

The *fruit* of the Holy Spirit is described for us in Galatians 5:22-23. There Paul said: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” These different kinds of fruit are not gifts which the Holy Spirit hands out in random fashion to different people so that one has the fruit of love, another the fruit of peace, and another the fruit of kindness or gentleness. The various fruit of the Spirit are not distributed in ones or twos or threes. God intends that we should have and exhibit all of these qualities in our lives. As we more and more open our lives to the indwelling and leadership of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the more we will cultivate and exhibit the fruit of the Spirit. God’s design for each of us is that we should have an increasing abundance of all these varieties of fruit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

All of these grow in our lives as fruit grows on branches. Your life and mine are like branches which have been grafted into the main stem vine – which is Jesus Himself (John 15:1-8). As the Holy Spirit refines us and shapes us into the likeness of Christ, as we grow in grace and godliness, we will increasingly bear the fruit of the Spirit. But it is possible, as Paul warns in 1 Thessalonians 5:19, to quench the Spirit. It is possible for us to neglect or to resist the Holy Spirit’s presence and leadership in our lives. If that happens, we will become unhealthy and unproductive branches, withering on the vine. But if we stay connected to the vine, if we stay connected to Christ, if we daily draw our nourishment from Him and follow the leading of His Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit will be increasingly evident in our lives, to the glory and praise of God.

GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

This brings us to the *gifts* of the Holy Spirit, or *spiritual gifts*, which is the focus of Paul’s teaching in these verses in 1 Corinthians 12. He says in verse 4: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit.” The word Paul uses here for “gifts” is the Greek word *charismata*. From it we get the words “charisma” and “charismatic,” and the charismatic movement in the church is so named because of its emphasis on the discovery and exercise of certain spiritual gifts.

The root of the word *charismata* is the Greek word *charis*, which is the New Testament word for “grace.” So the *charismata* are gifts of grace – gifts of God’s grace – given by the Holy Spirit to the church for its ministry in the name of Christ. Ray Stedman points out that these gifts are capacities to serve. They are abilities given to us by God Himself to be used in His service. John Huffman describes gifts of the Holy Spirit as those skills or abilities which the Holy Spirit gives to enable us – each of us – to make a

complementary contribution to the family of God. I like this definition, from Clyde McDowell: “A spiritual gift is a believer’s Spirit-given ability for Christian service.” They are special abilities given to genuine followers of Christ, given by the free and sovereign choice of the Holy Spirit, and given for Christian service.

Now, these gifts are not like the superpowers possessed by some fictitious superheroes. In the “Snapshots” section of USA Today not long ago, they listed the top superpowers adults today would like to have. At the top of the list was the ability to read minds (28 percent). Next was the ability to fly (15 percent). Then came the power to become invisible (11 percent) and having superhuman strength (9 percent). None of these, or the ability to leap tall buildings at a single bound, is what Paul has in view when he writes about spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are those special abilities given by the Holy Spirit to the church – to the people of God – to carry out its God-given mission in the world to the praise and glory of God.

Paul lists several of these gifts in verses 8-10 and others in verses 28-30. He mentions others in Romans 12:6-8, and still others in Ephesians 4:7-11. Peter also gives a succinct summary of spiritual gifts in 1 Peter 4:10-11, distinguishing between two general types of gifts: speaking gifts and serving gifts. None of these lists is intended to be exhaustive. They are, instead, descriptive, pointing out the magnificent diversity of the spiritual gifts God gives to His people.

Here is something that ought to be intuitively obvious: In the body of Christ, in the fellowship of the church, we are not all the same. We come from different backgrounds. We do not all have the same skin color. We have different interests. We have different personalities and personal preferences. And we have different gifts. We have been called and gifted by the Holy Spirit to do different things. I couldn’t do many of the things that many of you do in the life and ministry of Faith half as well as you do them, because God has given you gifts He didn’t give me. And He has given me gifts that some of you don’t have. As Paul says in verses 4-6: “There are different kinds of gifts, but (it is) the same Spirit (who gives them). There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.” There is marvelous diversity in the gifts God gives and in the ways God works, but God Himself – the one, true and living God – is behind it all and Lord of it all.

GIVEN TO EVERY BELIEVER

The Holy Spirit gives particular gifts to whomever He chooses. But notice this: Every believer receives at least one spiritual gift. No one is left out. In verse 7 Paul says: “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” To each one – including you and me. The New Testament teaching is that in Christ, every believer is called to ministry and is gifted for ministry of some kind. There are no exceptions to the rule. Every believer – which includes you and me. Every believer has at least one spiritual gift, one gift of the Holy Spirit, which is to be used in ministry of some kind. Your gift(s) may be different from mine, and my gift(s) may be different from yours. But all of us who are in Christ, all of us who know and trust Jesus as Lord

and Savior in our lives, have received at least one spiritual gift, one “manifestation of the Spirit.”

GIVEN FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Notice, too, the purpose for which these gifts are given. They are given, Paul says in verse 7, “for the common good.” Every spiritual gift, whatever it is, whether it is a speaking gift or a serving gift, whether it is the gift of spiritual discernment or teaching or administration or mercy or compassion or even one of the sign gifts, such as tongues or healing – every spiritual gift is to be used for the common good. For the blessing and building up of the people of God. They are not given for the purpose of glorifying ourselves or to promote our own interests. They are given and are to be used to glorify God and to minister to people in His name. 1 Peter 4:10 says that we are to use whatever gift(s) we have received for what purpose? To serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.”

The gifts of the Spirit are distributed among us to be used to serve others for the common good – for the blessing and nurturing and strengthening and the enlargement of the church – to the end that needs will be met and God will be exalted.

Let me try to bring this out of the realm of the theoretical into the realm of the personal. If you belong to Christ by faith, you have some spiritual gift or gifts to be used in the ministry of the church for the common good, for the blessing and strengthening of the church, and for the glory of God. Are you using your gift(s) in God’s service? Have you found your place of service in the kingdom of God?

Are you familiar with the 80/20 principle of social organizations? Adapted from the work of an Italian economist named Vilfredo Pareto, the 80/20 principle says that in many organizations, whether we are talking about churches or civic clubs or other voluntary associations, 80 percent of the work is done by just 20 percent of the people – which means, conversely, that the remaining 80 percent of the people are carrying just 20 percent of the load. I don’t know if it is true here at Faith, at least in terms of those percentages, but I do know that in our church family some people are in danger of burning out, while others are in danger of rusting out. Some, overloaded with ministry responsibilities and trying to do too much, are on the verge of collapsing, while others are content to stay on the sidelines and be spiritual consumers of what the church has to offer. Do I need to tell you that this is not God’s design for His church?

We’re at a pretty critical juncture right now in the life of our church. In the last year, we have said good-bye to some key leaders in our church, as God has led them to new communities and places of ministry. The Lord led Ken and Sharyl Wernick to North Carolina. He called the Borgstrands to the St. Louis area. Richard and Chiara Stitzer have been called to Atlanta with the Army National Guard. The Air Force is calling Sergio and Debbie Cafarelli to Boston later this summer (and we trust it is God’s calling, too). The Lord is calling Kevin and Hannah O’Brien, key members of our Redeemer Launch team, to a new ministry in Mississippi that begins in July. In August we will be

saying good-bye to Justin and Wendy Sembler, as they follow the Lord's leading to seminary in St. Louis. In September Chuck and Carole Torpy will be leaving us to move to the Winchester area.

Neither our Session nor our Board of Deacons is at full strength. A full complement of Ruling Elders on the Session is 15. We are currently at 12, and will be down to 11 when the Cararellis leave in a couple months. We currently have 15 active Deacons and will be down to 14 when the Torpys leave. We need 18 Deacons to be at full strength, and the truth is we could use more, in order to share the load in this vital ministry of care and compassion in our church family.

We have needs in other areas of our church's ministry as well. Our children's ministry is a key area of need. Bob Barnett has said on more than one occasion that one of the most effective ways we as a church will reach the greater Kingstowne community is through Christ-centered, high-quality ministry to families with young children. I think Pastor Bob is right on target! To develop this ministry to the children and families of our church and community, we need the committed and gifted leadership of people in our church family. And we need people to come alongside those who are already serving regularly and faithfully in our Nursery ministry, as well as in our Sunday School and Children's Church.

For those who feel called to come alongside our middle school and high school students in our youth ministry, there are opportunities to use your gifts. There are opportunities to serve as greeters and/or ushers on Sunday mornings, welcoming members, regular attenders and newcomers alike, and assisting with bulletins and the offering. Our greeter team leaders and usher team leaders would be thrilled to have your help. Our Praise Team ministry is looking for guitarists, especially, and possibly some vocalists as well. I realize playing the guitar is not necessarily a *spiritual* gift, but it is a much-needed and desired gift which can be used in the ministry of worship. Snow removal may not be a spiritual gift either, but it may well be an expression of the spiritual gift of service, and while winter and the possibility of snow may be the furthest thing from your mind at this time of year, our Property and Facilities Committee is looking for someone or someones to operate our snow blower and help with snow removal next winter.

Then there is our Redeemer church plant under the leadership of Pastor David Fischler. There is a plethora of opportunities for all those who feel called by God to join the Launch Team in the adventure of starting and growing a new church that God can use to bring unbelievers to saving faith in Christ, to build mature believers, to meet a myriad of needs in the lives of people God cares about, and to impact the Lorton-Woodbridge community for the glory of God.

I could keep going, because there are many other opportunities for us to use our gifts in the Lord's service.

“To each one” – to each of us – “the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). Are you using the gift(s) God has given you for His

purposes? For the common good and the glory of God? Or are you among the 80 percent who are content to drink in the blessings of God while the 20 percent wear themselves out in the Lord's service? Are you willing to become a blessing to others by your service in the name of Christ?

EXCUSES, EXCUSES

You may remember that Moses was living in exile from Egypt, tending sheep out on the far side of the desert in Exodus 3 when the Lord appeared to him in the burning bush and called to him. When the Lord called to Moses, He did not say: "Hello? Is anybody there? Can anyone hear me?" No. He said: "Moses! Moses!" It was a personal call. The Lord called to him and spoke to him by name. He said: "Moses, I have a job for you. This is your mission: I want you to go back to Egypt and bring my people out. Go! For I am sending you."

Do you remember how Moses responded? He wasn't exactly gung-ho. He had some questions, some doubts, some fears. He said: "Why me, Lord? Surely there must be someone else who can do it, someone better than I. Lord, please send someone else. Let someone else do it." But the Lord said: "Moses, I want *you!*"

You see, God has a place and a plan for each one of us. Just as He had a job for Moses to do, so He has a job for you and a job for me. And He has shaped us for His service.

There is an old Frank & Ernest comic strip that shows one of them standing in front of two lists. The first says: LIST OF THINGS TO DO TODAY, and it has several entries. The second says: LIST OF EXCUSES FOR NOT DOING THEM. Doesn't that say something about human nature?

Before I wrap up this message, I want to suggest five different excuses you and I might give, five reasons not to use our gifts in God's service when He calls.

The first is the response of Moses himself, who objected that he wasn't good enough, that he didn't have the right stuff for the job. He said: "Lord, You're making a mistake here. There must be somebody else who is more qualified, somebody more gifted, somebody more eloquent and better equipped than I am. Please let someone else do it."

Moses, you see, had some deep-seated doubts about himself. His life hadn't turned out the way he thought it would. His self-confidence had been shattered. He felt totally inadequate. The interesting thing is that God did not tell Moses he was wrong. Moses *was* inadequate. So am I. And so are you. We're all inadequate. There is always someone, somewhere, who is more gifted, more eloquent, more qualified. But Moses was the man God wanted. And what really mattered was not who Moses was, but who God is.

Considering his own calling from God, Paul would write in 2 Corinthians 2:16: "Who is equal to such a task?" He answers his own question in 2 Corinthians 3:5: "(It is) not that

we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.”

And the Lord’s answer to Moses’ objection? He said in Exodus 3:12: “I will be with you.” The Lord promised His presence. And that is all Moses really needed. It is all you and I need when the Lord has work for us to do.

A second objection one might raise is the fear of failure. Moses may well have thought: “Lord, You know I’ve blown it before. What if I blow it again? What if I do what You’re asking me to do and the people don’t believe me? What if they won’t listen to me?” The fear of failure can paralyze you. It threatened to paralyze Moses. What Moses didn’t get was that the Lord was with Him, and the Lord would be with Him, and that would make all the difference.

The thing we have to remember is that God will not call us to any task or ministry without giving us the tools and resources of His grace to accomplish it. And He promises the blessing of His presence. He says: “I will be with you. I will give you the grace and the strength – all the resources you need – to accomplish my purpose. Don’t be afraid. For I am with you, just as I was with Moses.”

A third excuse is: “I’m too old, Lord. I’m getting up there in years. I’m past my prime. It’s somebody else’s turn now. Let someone else, someone younger, do it.” Let me remind you, if you’re inclined to feel this way, that Moses was 80 years old when the Lord appeared to him and called him back to Egypt. And Moses still had 40 years left to serve the Lord!

I know that with increasing years, health limitations often come. These bodies of ours aren’t designed to last forever. After a while, the original parts begin to wear out! Each of us, at whatever stage in life we find ourselves, needs to know our limitations, accept our limitations, and live within them. You may well find yourself at the place in life where you can’t do all the things you once did. The issue for you, if you are among our “seasoned citizens,” is not: What can I no longer do? The real question is: What *can* I do? How can I serve my Lord and His church at this time in my life? Whatever your age, you are never too old to use your gift(s) in some way in God’s service.

A fourth excuse is: “I’m too young or too inexperienced.” This was the response of Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1 when the Lord said: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I set you apart. I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” But Jeremiah said: “Ah, Sovereign Lord, I don’t know how to speak. I am only a child? (Jeremiah 1:4-6).

When the call of God comes to use your gift(s) for the common good, it does not matter how young or inexperienced you are. The thing that counts is not who or what you are, but who God is. And God said to Jeremiah: “I know you’re young, but I know what I’m doing. You’re the man for the job. Don’t be afraid, for I will be with you. I will take care of you and give you what you need.”

Listen up, young people! God has a place and a plan for you. He wants what you have to give – right now!

Whatever your age, let me urge you to begin each day by asking:

- Lord, what can I do for You today?
- How can I serve You right where I am?
- How can I make my life count for You?
- How can I make a difference for You in the church, in my community, at school, and at home?

God has a place and a job for you. He wants you to use the gift(s) you have. Don't expect someone else to do it.

The fifth excuse we often give is this: "I'm too busy. I've already got too much on my plate and too much stress in my life. I can't take on anything else."

The truth is, a lot of us really are too busy. Some people are overcommitted, because they are always there to say yes when there is a need in the church or community or family. Some of us *are* too busy, and there are things we need to cut out of our lives. Maybe you are too busy, and you need to slow down. Maybe you need to learn to better pace yourself, and to say no sometimes – but not to God. Maybe you need to consider whether you are busy with God's agenda or your own. If you're too busy to do what God is calling you to do, you really are too busy.

Remember, you were made for ministry. You were shaped for serving God. You have been blessed to be a blessing. To each one of us a manifestation – a gift – of the Holy Spirit has been given, to be used for the common good, for the building up of the church and its ministry in the world, and for the glory of God.

May we discover and develop and use our gifts gladly and generously in God's service. With no excuses. Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.