

The Grace – Gifts Connection
Romans 12:6-8, 1 Peter 4:10-11

Friends, what did you get for Christmas this year?

Or maybe I should ask “did you get what you wanted for Christmas this year? – or did you have to make a trip back to the store to exchange a gift that you or someone else didn’t like,

or maybe even worse, you re-gifted that gift you didn’t like on to someone else... I mean there are only so many travel coffee mugs one can use right?

So when I ask what you received for Christmas, I hope it’s something that you wanted, that you can keep and that is useful to you in some way.

And I certainly hope that as we celebrated Christmas, you came away with an understanding that God’s gift to us in Jesus Christ is a gift that you needed, that you plan to keep it and that you will make use of it – and not return it or neglect it, because

it’s easy to do once the Christmas season is finished and all the decorations, music, and celebrations are over.

And friends, perhaps we might get back to the real world – and the little baby in a manger, the angels and the shepherds, well it seems out of place now.

So friends, I want to remind you this morning – at the risk of sounding cheesy – that God’s gift to us, Jesus Christ, is a gift that keeps on giving – long after the December fades away.

Because that little baby in the manger grew up. He offered his life and his death for us, He was our substitute, and God raised him back to life and He ascended back to Heaven – as the Apostle’s creeds states – where He sits at the right hand of God – the Father, Almighty.

And as Jesus Christ moves from a lowly obscure birth in a stable to being exalted by God the Father to Ruler of the Universe – the bible says that He gives gifts.

“When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.” (Eph 4:8)

And friends, over the next couple of months we are going to take a closer look at some of those gifts which he gives to his people... – the church, you and to me.

And it's important that we take the time to learn about these gifts- commonly known as spiritual gifts, because the scripture instructs us to do so. Paul writes...

Now about **spiritual gifts**, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. (1 Cor 12:1)

We need to learn what the scriptures tell us about these gifts, understand what they are, where they come from, how to discover them and how use them, and perhaps most importantly why Christ gives them to the church.

So, let's look at the situation in which many churches, especially mainline protestant ones, find themselves in these days.

The glory days of institutional religion are over; we live in an increasingly hostile and non-Christian society. The church's membership rolls are shrinking, youth are leaving, and it's

getting harder and harder to meet the budget each year. People don't volunteer like they used to, it's harder to fill leadership positions, people are burning out, morale is low and more churches are closing than new ones being planted. Why?

Aside from being unable to respond to the cultural changes going on around them, churches are victims of the Pareto and the Peter principles as well.

The Pareto Principle is the 80/20 principle. Most churches have 20% of the people doing 80% of the work and 80% of the people only doing 20% of the work. Same with the giving.

And the Peter Principle states that in any given organization people will rise to their level of incompetence. In other words a talented enthusiastic individual will be given tasks and do a good job at them and will be promoted until they are put into a position which reveals their incompetence.

So you have churches being led by people who are enthusiastic perhaps but not competent or qualified to lead.

And to some extent Valleyview is affected by all these things as well. And we talked about how we are called by God to change some of these things in our Stewardship series, how to break out of doing church reactively.

So this is the situation which most churches find themselves in today.

And friends, every church today is looking for something to help it survive and thrive. And there are solutions available.

You can take a church, move it from surviving to thriving, achieve high levels of congregation satisfaction, combat the Pareto and Peter Principles, keep volunteers motivated and happy, prevent burn-out and do many other good things

And you can do this by using tools and insights from Marketing, Psychology, Business Management theory and Educational philosophy.

These tools can help to determine how your people can best function together, which tasks they should perform, how to deal with and resolve conflict, etc...

And we can use insights from organizational psychology to help us bring change to a group that is stuck in their ways, to help achieve buy-in for values and a vision, to gain the communities support for goals and tasks which we want to accomplish.

And friends, all these tools and information and insights work because they are part of how God has created this world to function.

And in fact there are many people who are taking and applying this information and wisdom to the church and they are experiencing all the results that we've talked about.

However, if you've ever been part of a church which is experiencing success in overcoming the challenges it faces by using these psychological and management tools you will notice that over time there are some unintended consequences.

Maybe you notice that decisions are made simply on the basis of how many people will fill the seats on a Sunday. Or perhaps the minister's sermon series on Sin gets vetoed by the board because it's not a popular topic for people these days.

Or pastoral care is reduced to having people read self-help books...it could be any number of things but you notice something is amiss in the church.

You see these tools are great for businesses, politics, non-profit groups, hospitals, scouts or any other organizations. But the church is not an organization – it is an organism.

The scripture talks about the church as the Body of Christ, and as an organism friends, the Body of Christ needs special and specific tools to help it meet the challenges in whatever context it may exist.

The Good news is that Christ supplies the special and specific tools his Body needs – spiritual gifts, and the scripture give us the information and instruction about them to overcome our ignorance.

So friends, the solution to the church's challenges does not lie in adopting better business management techniques, or changing organizational structure, or personality profiling everyone to help prevent and resolve conflict...

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that we can't use and apply some of this wisdom in the church. The Body of Christ has organizational aspects; it needs to manage its business, so there is legitimate use of tools specific to these areas.

But what I want us to understand is that if we are attempting to be the church and do the work of the church – without using spiritual gifts as our primary tools – then we will end up becoming something else. Because our tools shape us.

So we will end up as a service club or a social club or a group of activists. We could even be a well organized group of people who hold religious services and pay a minister to visit sick people... even still calling ourselves a church. But whatever we become, we are no longer the Body of Christ, and the question might be asked if we ever truly were?

Friends, Spiritual Gifts are what distinguish the church and make it unique, different from any other organization that exists. I think that is the primary purpose of spiritual gifts, to make the church the church, and keep it the church – the Body of Christ.

So, we've covered the Why – now let's take a closer look at the What.

Friends if you were able to read our scripture passages in the Greek this morning, we would discover that the special gifts Christ gives for his Body are called “charisma”

Romans - We have different “*charismata*” according to the “*charis*” given to each of us

1 Peter- Each of you should use whatever “*charisma*” you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's “*charis*” in its various forms.

Friends the key here is to note how the words for *gift* – *charisma* and *grace* - *charis* are connected to each other,

related to each other, stem from each other. In fact it's a bit of a mistranslation to speak about *spiritual* gifts – instead we should refer to them as *grace* gifts – because literally translated the word *charismata* means “*things of grace*”

And it's the “things of grace” which make the church the body of Christ, something unique from any other organization. And the twenty different “gifts” that are listed in the New Testament are all referred to as “*charismata*” – things of grace. Grace-gifts that are given to help a group of people become the Body of Christ by defining who we are and in turn what we do.

So prophesying, teaching, serving, leading, encouraging, showing mercy, giving, all these actions do not stand on their own. We should not understand them or try to define them by first comparing them with examples from business or education or politics, instead we need to understand them and define them as actions birthed out of grace - *charis*

The *charis* that God has shown to us by pursuing us when we show no interest or regard for Him, the *charis* that He has shown to us by revealing Himself and instructing us on how we

can worship and obey Him, the charis He has shown to us by forgiving us for ignoring and disobeying Him by having His Son Jesus Christ offer his life as a sacrifice to pay for those offenses. The charis He shows to us by having His Holy Spirit change our hearts and lives and making us new and giving us a place in the promised New Heaven and Earth.

And through the Holy Spirit this charis lives in us and overflows out into our lives as charismata – so we lead others in grace, we teach others in grace, we give to others out of grace – the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And each person who has experienced this grace will manifest at least one type of grace-gift as a part of the Body of Christ, and often many more.

Which should lead us to ask ourselves – Have I, do I experience the grace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in my life?

Do I live out of the grace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Do I play my part as a member of the Body of Christ (a hand, a foot,

a mouth) out of the grace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ or is it for a different reason?

Reasons of obligation or duty? Or because I believe in the good of all mankind, because I want to make a difference in the world, because it's what good people do? Do I serve because I don't want the church fall apart, do I participate because I have an ability or talent or am skilled at doing something, because I think I have a lot to offer... or is it out of experiencing of the grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ?

Friends, if we examine ourselves and we find something else other than grace as our starting point - we need to return to the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ (scripture, confession, testimony) and reclaim that grace afresh in our lives.

Remember, coming to an awareness of yourself as a sinner needing Christ's grace and forgiveness is not just the entry point into the family of God after which you're done with it, but it's the means by which we continue and grow and serve in the family of God.

Friends, hear this well - what marks us as a follower of Christ is not how often we read the bible, how often we pray, how many years we've attended church, how much we volunteer and are active in the church – what marks us is that the grace of the gospel of Christ lives in us and that charismata flows out of us!

If we understand this we'll see ourselves as the Prodigal son, if we don't we will come across to others like the Unforgiving Servant – in spite of how good of a person we are.

Friends its the *things of grace* that make us the church, and they empower us to accomplish the mission which Christ has given us – to make disciples here in Springbank Hill, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that He has taught us.

Simply put, this means that our *charismata* results in other people experiencing *charis* and eventually *charismata* flows out of their lives and into other people's lives and the cycle continues – the Body of Christ grows.

So friends, what charis did you get for Christmas? Amen.