

The Grace – Gifts Connection
Romans 12:6-8, 1 Peter 4:10-11, Luke 15:21-30

Brothers and sisters, I know that we're a month out from having celebrated Easter, the Ascension and Pentecost... and we're only a month away from our Summer At Valleyview season... but humor me for a moment here, and think back a few months, all the way back to December – because I want to ask you an out of season question. What did you get for Christmas this year?

Or maybe I should ask if you remember if you got 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... or you are saving it to re-gift it for Father's Day coming - I mean there are only so many travel mugs that one can use right, but hey Dad can always use another one 😊

So, if you can remember what you received for Christmas, I hope it was something that you wanted, that you kept and that is useful to you in some way.

And obviously I hope that as you celebrated Christmas, you also 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, especially as we've seen how God's gift of Jesus secures our forgiveness and resurrection at Easter.

But we also know that once the Christmas season is finished and all the decorations, and music, and celebrations are done, we move on pretty quickly don't we.

Even though if a baby had been born in our family back in December - just five months ago, we'd still be in that newborn phase, right? We wouldn't be moving on from it like we do from our celebration of Jesus' birth.

So brothers and sisters, 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 celebrations of December fade away, even after the Easter lilies wilt, and we are starting to make plans for summer vacation.

Because at Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost we realized that the 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 just as importantly Christ ascended back to Heaven – as the Apostle’s creeds states – where He sits at the right hand of God – the Father, Almighty.

So 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. Ephesians 4:8 *“When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.”* Not just the gift of salvation and but the gift of the Holy Spirit to be poured out upon His people, and equip them with spiritual gifts.

And brothers and sisters, it’s important that we take the time to learn about these spiritual gifts from the Spirit, because the scripture instructs us to do so. Paul writes in 1 Cor 12:1 *“Now about **spiritual gifts**, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant.”*

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.

Brothers and sisters, the fact is that so many churches desperately need these gifts in our day and age.

Because the glory days of institutional religion are over; people don’t attend church on Sunday mornings just because that’s what we do... Sunday mornings compete with soccer and hockey and dance practices, people do brunch on Sundays... young people get scheduled to work on Sundays – its not automatically set aside as a day to worship the Lord.

Our society is ambivalent, and in some ways hostile to the Christian faith, it no longer is part of our cultural knowledge, our educators are even denying the self-evident truths and design that God has built into His creation that we are created male and female.

Many churches are struggling to get people to volunteer and get involved. It's a struggle to fill leadership positions and the people who have been serving are starting to burn out, morale is low and giving to support the church budget is even lower...

The result is there are more churches being closed than new ones being planted.

And aside from being unable to respond to the cultural changes going on around them, it's easy for churches to become the victims of the Pareto, Peter, and Proxy principles as well.

The Pareto Principle is the 80/20 principle. In most churches 80% of the people are doing 20% of the work while 20% of the people are doing 80% of the work. It generally works out the same for the financial support of a church as well.

And the Peter Principle states that in any given organization people will rise to their level of incompetence. In other words, any individual who shows some interest or enthusiasm will be put on a committee and put to work and continued to be given responsibilities 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. But we're so desperate to fill positions it doesn't matter – beggars can't be choosers, right??

And the Proxy principle is the belief that we can hire someone to do the ministry work for us – by proxy as it were. Maybe we've got some legacy funds in place and we hope that if we can just hire the right staff person, the right minister and pay

them to dedicate their time and energies to do the work, we can turn this ship around. Brothers and sisters, many churches find themselves in this situation today.

And in response, we spend countless hours talking about it, speculating on why we are unable to respond effectively to our changing cultural context, arguing about how we must embrace change or what ought to be changed – and if thinking that if we can successfully do that - the decline might be reversed and our church will be full on Sundays and there will be enough volunteers to go around and keep the church up and running and paying its bills.

Brothers and sisters, the truth is that every church 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.

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 and change management professionals to help a church that is stuck in their ways to change, to help them buy-in to new values and a vision, to gain the congregation's support for goals and tasks which we want to accomplish.

And the truth is brothers and sisters, all these tools and techniques, information and insights can bring a level of success 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 good results, they are moving from surviving to thriving.

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 is told not to preach a sermon series on Sin - because it's not a popular topic for people these days and its not what people want to come to church to hear about.

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 brothers and sisters. And as such the Body of Christ needs special and specific tools to help it meet the challenges in whatever context it may exist.

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

So brothers and sisters, the solution to the challenges that the Church, your church, faces – does not first and foremost come from adopting better business management techniques, or changing the organizational structure, or giving every a personality profile to help them understand each other better and prevent conflict.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that we can't use and apply some of this creational wisdom in the church. The Body of Christ does have 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 actually end up becoming something else. Because the tools we use to do our work - shape us.

So, if we are not using spiritual gifts we will end up becoming service club or a social club or a group of activists. We might even be a well-organized group of people who hold religious services and pay a minister to visit sick people... we might even still call ourselves a church. But... we will no longer be the Body of Christ, and the question might be asked if we ever truly were?

You see brothers and sisters; spiritual gifts are what distinguish the church and make it unique - different from any other organization that exists. I believe the primary purpose of spiritual gifts, is to make the church The Church, and keep it the church – the Body of Christ. This is why Jesus gives these gifts to His Body.

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

Brothers and sisters, if you were able to read our scripture passages in the Greek this morning, you 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.

And the key here is to note how the word for *gift* – *charisma* and the word for *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 – we should really refer to them as *grace* gifts – because literally translated the word ***charismata*** means “*things of grace*”

And it's these “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 then... what we do.

So, what was mentioned in our scripture readings this morning - prophesying, teaching, serving, leading, giving, encouraging, showing mercy, 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, or whatever dictionary definitions we might have for them - 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 assuring us that we have eternal life with Him in the promised New Heavens and Earth when He returns.

And through the Holy Spirit this ***charis*** lives in us and overflows out into our lives as ***charis-mata***... 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?

Perhaps its helpful to reflect on the question of what do I deserve? Are you in a place where if you were to stand before God you would echo the words of the lost son in Matt 15:21 ? *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”* I do not deserve this...

What did the son deserve? He deserved to be shunned by his father, turned away as he himself had wished his father dead in demanding all his share of the inheritance to go and squander... that’s what the son deserved.

In his pitiful condition however, he hoped for mercy. To be spared being turned away and being allowed to return as a servant.

But here’s the thing about grace brothers and sisters, grace is getting something amazing that we don’t deserve. Not just being shown mercy in being spared from what we do deserve. But getting something good that we don’t deserve.

A more recent story about grace comes to us from the novel Les Mis. Jean Val Jean is a harden convict who has lost all hope in humanity and become selfish and self- serving. Released from prison he finds no sympathy or help except from a kindly old bishop who takes him in for the night and gives him food and lodging.

Once the priest is asleep however Jean quickly takes advantage of his kindness by stealing the silverware and a candlestick and runs off.

The local police stop him and catch him with the stolen goods and bring him back to the bishop in the morning – however... instead of pressing charges the bishop expressed joy that the police had brought him back, so that... he can give him the other candlestick which he forgot to take as part of the gift that the bishop had given him. Wink wink.

But, as the bishop gives Jean the other candlestick he leans in and whispers in Jean's ear. *"my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God."*

Brothers and sisters, the scriptures have another way of saying this same thing to us, in Romans 5:8 the Apostle Paul says to us *"while we were yet sinners... Christ died for us!"*

So, do we live out of the grace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Do we play our part as a member of the Body of Christ out of the grace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Or is it for a different reason?

Like obligation or duty... or because we believe in the good of all mankind... maybe we want to make a difference in the world, because it's what good people do. Do we serve because we 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 because we are experiencing the grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ?

Brothers and sisters, if we examine ourselves and we find something else other than grace as our starting point, and likely it's a mixture of things... We need to return to the grace of Jesus Christ and reclaim that grace afresh in our lives, and I pray that the Holy Spirit will do that in each of us this morning.

Remember, coming to an awareness of yourself as a sinner who has offended God Almighty and stands under His wrath and judgment and thus needs 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!

Brothers and sisters, 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 serve the church – as important as those things may be...

What marks us is that the grace of the gospel of Christ lives in us and the resulting *charismata* that 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 much of good of a person we are.

Brothers and sisters, it is 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 Southwest Calgary, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that He has taught us.

Simply put, this means that the *charismata* coming from us results in other people experiencing *charis* and then

eventually *charismata* flows out of their lives and into other people's lives and the cycle continues – and this is how the Body of Christ grows.

So, brothers and sisters– be encouraged. Jesus Christ gives gifts to His church, to you, in order to set us up for success in making disciples of all nations – and to shape us and form us as we do His work...

It's all about gifts of grace – grace gifts brothers and sisters.

So remember, justice is when we get what we deserve, mercy is when we are spared from what we deserve. But grace... grace is when we don't get what we deserve, AND get something really really good instead.

May the GRACE- gifts of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you!
Amen.