

The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

THE UNOPENED GIFTS

Today we begin a new sermon series titled: The Unopened Gifts. It is still the Extraordinary in the Ordinary because this series is about the extraordinary gifts that God graciously and generously gives to his church. The challenge, I think, to this church is: do these gifts remain unopened?

I am more passionate about the church now than I have ever been. Preaching through Ephesians has reminded me again of what God thinks of the church and of the extraordinary power and privilege we have as part of the body of Christ; to be reminded again of all that God has so generously lavished on us – every spiritual blessing in Christ. I am more convinced now that the church is the hope of the world. Not because of the people who make up the church but because we are called to preach to the gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ (as Paul would express it)! The church has the good news of the Gospel and I realise again, through Ephesians, of just how much Christ loves the church and that the church is the bride of Christ – his beloved – his glorious inheritance in the saints! I now have more of a desire than I have ever done for the church to become fully what God intended.

I would like to be part of a church where leaders are gifted and released to lead and where they will lead with all diligence. I would like to be part of a church whose organisation facilitates effectively the various ministries of the church. I would like to be part of a church where everyone found a small group that enabled them to build significant relationships and where people desired to meet together to grow. I would like to be part of a church where worship is real, honest, genuine, inspiring and relevant. I would like to be part of a church that has a deep desire to seek and save the lost. I would like to be part of a church where being a fully devoted follower of Christ shaped everything we did – inside and outside the church. I would like to be part of a church dedicated to being good stewards of our time, talents and possessions. I would like to be part of a church that was committed to serving the community and the poor. I would like to be part of a church that desired to equip families to become strong places of growth. I would like to be part of a church where every person was stepping out in faith. I would like to be part of a church where every person was committed to growing partnerships across church. I would like to be part of a church where every person was reaching communities with God's love. I would like to be part of a church where every person was committed to coming together for prayer. I would like to be part of a church like that because it's the sort of church that God intended.

A church like that brings honour to God's name. Now since I believe that God desires that his name is honoured through the church, and since I believed that the church can become what God intended, I believe God will help us in becoming such a church.

"One day a group of people gathered in a shop for the sale of some antiques. The auctioneer brought out an old, dusty violin. He told the audience that it was a rare Stradivarius and that it was worth a

great deal of money. No-one, however, was impressed; only one bid for five pounds was offered. Meanwhile a man had entered the shop from the street. He was very tall and thin, and wore a velvet coat. He walked to the front of the shop, picked up the violin, and dusted it. He then held it to his ear and reached for the bow, as he did so, a murmur went round the room, 'Paganini'. For the next few minutes, the great musician held everyone spell bound with the most exquisite virtuoso's performance. Then he stopped. As he did so, the people started clamouring for the violin: fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety pounds. Eventually the violin was sold to Paganini himself for one hundred pounds, and that evening he held a vast audience of thousands in rapt attention as he played the dirty, dusty violin once again."¹

The story is a beautiful illustration of the Master's touch. We can apply this story individually to our own lives: we do not feel we are worth much – just very ordinary really, but when we place our lives in the Master's hands he can work the Extraordinary in the Ordinary. In God's eyes we are all as valuable as a Stradivarius. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, and we have been created to bring blessing to others. Jesus Christ is in the business of giving ordinary people an extraordinary purpose, and when we place our lives in the Master's hands, the melody of God's creativity can sound out from us.

We can also apply this illustration to the church when we place our lives together into the hands of the master he can work the extraordinary in the ordinary once again. We have been created and drawn down together, to bring blessing to others. God wants a church that brings honour to his name so he will take us, equip us and use us for that very purpose. In his great wisdom, and in his grace and love and mercy, God has generously given gifts to his church for its enrichment, so that we might honour him.

Now, if you are regularly here, you will not be unfamiliar with the idea that God gives gifts to his church. We often run a Network course – a course designed to help us discover our gifts and then figure out how to use them. If you haven't done Network I strongly encourage you to do it. The word translated 'gift' in the New Testament as the Greek word 'charisma' and it is best translated as 'grace-gift'. But in Modern Greek, the word charisma means a 'birthday present'. God gives presents to his church – all of which are waiting to be opened and used to build up the church that it may honour his name. The question is - are these presents unopened?

God gives presents to each of us and it is our responsibility to make sure we un-wrap them and use them for building up the church. Now there are a number of places in the New Testament that talk about gifts but we are going to focus on the list of nine gifts in 1 Corinthians 12.

1 Corinthians 12 v 1 -11: Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I tell you that no-one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no-one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. 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. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing

by the one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

Here Paul lists nine spiritual gifts:

- The message (word) of wisdom
- The message (word) of knowledge
- Faith
- Gifts of healing
- Miraculous powers
- Prophecy
- Discerning between Spirits
- Speaking in different kinds of tongues
- The interpretation of tongues

So why a series on these gifts? This is our 125th anniversary year; we want to be a vibrant family and a church that honours God ... don't we? Paul tells us in verse 7, that these (and all) gifts are given for the common good. These gifts are given for the good of the church. Elsewhere Paul tells us the gifts are to edify the church (that is an architectural term), and so literally he is saying these gifts are given to build the house of God. The gifts are given to build the house of God, not to tear it down – to strengthen, not weaken the church.

Over the following weeks we are going to study each gift in turn. Right now I want to say some things that I think are really important for us as we begin this journey. Paul is writing this letter to a church where the use of gifts is tearing down the church rather than building it up. However, Paul is clear that in a vibrant, healthy, growing, maturing church, one where God's name is truly honoured, these gifts will be in evidence. In fact, Paul would expect to see all of these nine gifts in operation in a healthy, vibrant, God honouring church.

I think there may be some significant challenges in that for a church like us. We are a very organised church in many ways – we plan the diary over a year ahead and if you want to book rooms, you have to be planned way in advance to guarantee getting what you want. We have the teaching programme planned four months ahead – and further although you don't see that!! We have rotas coming out of our ears. The danger I think for a church like us is that we can, without meaning to, organise the Holy Spirit out of everything.

We are privileged to have a bounty of musicians and worship leaders who are very gifted but, because we are well organised, we could organize the Holy Spirit out of our worship. Having two services – and the time pressure that brings may again lead us to closing down the opportunity we give the Holy Spirit to move among us.

“Let it be said that the church cannot be fully or freely the church without the presence and operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”² Paul was writing to a church where the use of these gifts was causing division. It was partly because there was an emphasis on the more spectacular gifts, and partly because some people saw themselves as the spiritual elite who over-emphasised the extraordinary and sensational gifts. They were claiming to be better than those who did not use these gifts.

I think it is very significant where these gifts come in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Immediately after he talks about gifts, he talks about the church as a body needing all its parts to play their part. His point seems to be: these gifts are God given grace gifts – presents – and they are given to all in different ways – but all are needed to make the body vibrant. Gifts are given, not for the benefit of the individual, but for the benefit of the community. The gifts of the Spirit have nothing to do with a hierarchy of spirituality, but everything to do with God’s abundant grace and his love for his church. So Paul is saying that any gifts that are given are given for the benefit of the community.

Paul talks again about gifts at the end of chapter 12, and then again in chapter 14. What comes between chapter 12 and 14?... chapter 13 of course. And chapter 13 begins: “And now I will show you the most excellent way”, which is the way of love. It seems to me the point here is that the exercise of gifts within the church must follow the way of love. Chapter 13 v 2 reads: ‘If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have faith that can move mountains, but have not loved, I am nothing’. “The church where the gifts are openly welcomed and responsibly handled is a healthy, a dynamic and a living church.”³

I would like to be part of a church where the melody of God’s creativity can sound out from us, because we do not leave the presents he has given us unopened, and we exercise them with Calvary love. Now to those of you who don’t want any change in our worship, and don’t really want manifestations of the Holy Spirit, the challenge is that Paul in no way discourages the use of these gifts. In fact he expects to see them, all of them, in a vibrant church that sings God’s melody. To those of you who are chomping at the bit, don’t think we’ve gone far enough, think you have all the gifts - the challenge is the way of love. Without Calvary love the use of gifts becomes like a clanging gong and causes division. My prayer is that through this series: we will discover afresh the gifts or presents God has graciously bestowed on us; that in the exercise and use of them we will be built into a vibrant, God honouring community, that is a light on a hill; that we will sing the melody of God himself, as the Master takes ordinary people and places his extraordinary gifts within them. I, for one, would like to be part of that kind of church.

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church by Rev Ian Phillips on 4th May 2008.

1. Quoted in: Stibbe: *“Know your spiritual gifts”*, Zondervan 2004 ed. Page 1
2. Stibbe, page 9
3. Sibbe, page 9

