

“SPIRITUAL GIFTS: UNWRAPPING YOUR GIFTS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Text: II Timothy 1:5-7; I Timothy 4:14-15

Introduction.

We ended last week with me urging you to take the Spiritual Gift Inventory we put in your box and set on the table and sent you the link for on the Internet. I urge you to do the inventory.

But once you have some clue about what gifts the Spirit has given you in the body of Christ, then what? We can know what our gift is but not be sure what to do with it or where to use it.

This morning I want to give us a tool to help us discern how and where to use our gifts. The tool is on the back of your bulletin and it's called SHAPE. It's not original with me but has been around for years. What is your shape for service and being used to make a difference?

To illustrate how it works I want to use the life of Paul as an example. Let's look at how God shaped him for the plan He had for him.

Paul's Spiritual Gifts.

Let's start with Paul's spiritual gifts. What were Paul's spiritual gifts? This shouldn't be too hard since he seemed to be blessed with a number of them.

"And of this gospel I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher." 2 Timothy 1:11

"I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you." I Corinthians 14:18

He certainly had a missions and evangelism gift (I Corinthians 9:19-23).

He was an instrument in the hands of the Spirit for miracles, healings and a resurrection. He had the gift of faith and exhortation and leadership.

What an amazing number and mix of gifts. That can create confusion about which ones to use, and when and where. How do you get focus and direction? Let's look at more of Paul's shape and how God shaped Him for a particular kind of service in God's kingdom.

Paul's Heart.

What was his strongest desire/ambition? What drove him? What really made him tick?

"It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation." Romans 15:20

"For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles." Galatians 2:8

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,..." Philippians 3:10

Paul's driving ambition was to know Christ and make Him known, especially where He was not known. So now we are starting to see some direction for how he focused his gifts.

What gets you out of bed every day? What do you love to do? If you could do anything for God and His kingdom what would you most like to do? As a Christian what do you care about?

Paul's Abilities.

What were his natural skills and vocational abilities? What did Paul know how to do that would help him in his spiritual calling?

"...Paul went to see them [Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth], and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned (debated) in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks." Acts 18:2b-4

Paul had the ability to work with hands at a trade that could easily be done in any city. Paul had the ability to debate, to think on feet. He had a quick, sharp mind useful for persuading others.

It's amazing how God fit the pieces together to make Paul the effective apostle he has.

Ability refers to natural, acquired or learned skills, talents, trades, knowledge, experience, expertise or training. We are talking about what you know how to do and are able to do. What are your areas of competence or confidence?

How many skills or abilities would you guess you have? National studies have shown that out of thousands of skills, the average person possesses 500 to 700 skills. They can be everything from organizing, speaking a second language, gardening, a sense of humor, solving problems, good with animals, doing first aid, computers, meeting new people, making or repairing things.

It makes sense that God will take our natural abilities and talents from birth and transform them and mix them with the spiritual gifts given at our new birth. Remember that famous line from Chariots of Fire when Eric Liddle said, "I know God created me for His service. But He also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure." He ran for God's glory.

That reminds me of the gifted journalist who wrote an article years ago about learning how to sweep floors to the glory of God. Honor God with all your abilities.

Paul's Personality.

What about Paul's personality? What kind of person was he? Was he an extrovert or an introverted; active or passive; a thinker or a feeler; was he more task oriented or people oriented; did he like routine or variety; was he more competitive or cooperative; type A or type B?

"You have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted (with fanatical zeal) the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers." Gal. 1:13-14

"...though I myself have reasons for such confidence....If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless." Philippians 3:4b-6

Remember the scene with Barnabas and John Mark (Acts 15:36-41)? Paul was on a mission and didn't have much use for John Mark who had dropped out of the previous mission.

God wired Paul's personality for the incredibly demanding task of being an apostle, planting churches among Gentiles, and enduring constant opposition.

Our personality or temperament is influenced by genetics, nationality, sex, race, birth order, environment, circumstances, opportunities and God.

God has wired each of us uniquely and there is no right or wrong temperament. In fact, the church needs the balance each of us brings just like our marriages and families need the balance. I don't have a lot of creativity, not a lot of right brain, but Phama sure does.

We need the Marys and the Marthas, the Peters and the Pauls, the Pauls and the Barnabas'.

There are ministries that are not suited for our personalities, so using our gifts in those areas might not work out well. You need to know the grain when working with wood. It helps to know your own grain.

Two people may be gifted in administration and motivated to serve as a volunteer, say at the Senior Center, but one is extroverted and one is introverted. The one should be at the front desk and other should in the back room working on projects.

Paul's Experiences.

The final piece of shape is our life experiences. What do you know about Paul's biography? What had God brought into his life that influenced his future and how God used him?

He was born a Jew and a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-29). God planned and used the circumstances of his birth.

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"I received my training at the feet of Gamaliel, and I was schooled in the strictest observance of our fathers' Law." Acts 22:3

Paul trained under the greatest scholar of day.

He watching while Stephen was stoned to death (Acts 8:1). He had a dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:1-20). God sent him to the desert for three years of maturing in Arabia (Galatians 1:18). He received a special vision from God (2 Corinthians 12:2-7).

And don't leave out the painful experiences, Paul had many.

(External) "...I have been in prison more times...near death often...been whipped five times with 39 lashes by the Jews and three times by the Romans...once stoned...I've been in three shipwrecks...and once spent 24 hours in the water...In my travels I've been in danger from floods...robbers...enemies...wild animals and false friends...I've served long hours without sleep or food or shelter or even clothing..." 2 Corinthians 11:23-27

(Internal) "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these great revelations, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan, to torment me." 2 Corinthians 12:7

God works in sequence to accomplish His divine purposes. What He has done in your past was done with a kingdom purpose in mind. God does not go off on tangents or take meaningless detours. He builds our character through events in an orderly fashion for a divine purpose.

Our lives don't often have the clarity of a burning bush or a Damascus Road. Often it is easier to see God's hand by looking back rather than in the midst of the moment.

Reflect on some of the key experiences or turning points of your life, experiences that have most affected or impacted your life, spiritual, painful, educational, successes, victories, triumphs, failures, defeats. When you reflect don't avoid the painful events, defeats, losses, sicknesses.

Romans 8:28 We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

“The cross is proof that there is no evil so dark and so obscene, but that God can turn it to Good” (Frederick Buechner).

Application and conclusion.

What God did with Paul He has done with each of us. As Christians we are part of the Body of Christ and part of God’s kingdom purposes. So what has He prepared and wired and equipped you to do? What is your SHAPE?

Paul’s exhortation to Timothy is his exhortation to us. Think about your gifts and abilities. Think about your past, your life and experiences, how you were raised, what you believe, what’s important to you, what you have some skill for. Think about how God has woven you together. Even think about the bad things, the hard things, the trials and how God means to use even that for His glory and the benefit of others.

Consider the good work God has begun and think about where He might be leading you. Don’t ignore or neglect His work. Pour gas on God’s fire in you, fan the flames, stir up embers, don’t be slothful in this. We have been created and saved for good works, let’s be diligent in doing them.

Are you afraid, do you feel inadequate, do you think everyone else better than you, are you content to just sit? None of that is from the Holy Spirit. Faith dwells in you, so step out in faith and trust God, not yourself. Take your confidence off yourself and put it in God. Don’t do what you do in your human strength or ability or courage. That won’t carry you very far. Rather in the Spirit’s power start using your spiritual gifts, start practicing and start making progress.

Our theological tradition helps us immensely here. Our shape grows out of a Biblical and Reformed understanding of the sovereignty of God who is in control of every facet of our lives.

“We can summarize this doctrine with one sentence: God has made you what you are. Through creation, redemption, and providence God has made you what you are. There have been no accidents; He is the author of all the factors. Because He is, we may assume that all of these things work together in indicating the kind of life that God has ordained that I should live. Profound insight into what God wants from us may be found in understanding what God has made of us.” (Terry Johnson, *When Grace Comes Home*, p. 163)

Because of the sovereignty of God over all things we can look at everything in our life as meaningful and purposeful. When we look at the threads of our lives a tapestry begins to come clear that points to a purpose and a plan, a divine design.