

## Sermon for 11/19/06

### ***The Giving Christian: A MATTER OF THE HEART – The Gift of Talent***

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ,  
AMEN

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**Main Theme:** This stewardship series concerns itself with the motivation behind our “living to give” Christian lifestyle. It’s a matter of the heart! When you are in love with Jesus, when God is number one, when His Spirit lives in your heart... you will recognize that your time, talents, and treasures are gifts that are to be used for HIS glory! Today we look at the precious gift of talent! Every one has been given a purpose – to love God and one another! Each has been given a specific spiritual gift to be used to fulfill the mission of God whenever and wherever the opportunity is presented. The purpose of spiritual gifts is to build up the church until we reach unity in the faith, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the Body of Christ. When we find and use our spiritual gifts we are 1) energized, 2) fulfilled, and 3) successful. The giving of our talents to God is a reflection that we have given our hearts to Him! It shows who God is! And there is joy in being “used” by God to reunite His children with Himself!

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**1) I WAS USED!** When someone says to you “**I was used!**”, what does that imply? (Wait...) That’s right – “***I was taken advantage of!***” And that’s how I felt several decades ago - “hoodwinked” by my pastor. “Charlotte,” I complained to my wife, “I made the ***mistake*** of telling him that my heart went out to people in 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries, and how I ***wished*** we could do something to help. Immediately he tells me that he and a ***dozen*** other members who had expressed ***similar concerns*** were getting together to talk about it, and he ***needed me*** to be there at that meeting. I tell him my life is ***full*** and ***busy***, and besides I had a ***softball game*** that night and wouldn’t be able to get home, shower, and get to the church in time. But no, he tells me just to ***come in my sweats***. So I reluctantly show up, the pastor walks in and explains how we all had a common interest in 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries and hopes we have a great talk. He then walks out and leaves us there looking at each other!”

**2) BEING THE CHURCH!** “So what happened?” my wife asked. “Well, you know me, I couldn’t just ***sit there***, I suggested we start taking turns ***sharing*** what we had expressed to pastor that got us ***invited*** to this shindig to begin with. Then I started writing ***common interests*** up on the board until a ***theme*** began to gel together. And before you know it, we have a ***mission statement***, and more meetings on the calendar. And because I couldn’t keep my ***big mouth shut***, I am now the ***chairperson*** of the “3<sup>rd</sup> world committee!” Charlotte just smiled. I had no idea what just happened, but I think she did. I’d been ***cleverly persuaded*** to move from being a ***consumer*** of God to becoming a

**partner** with God. In hindsight I realize now I had been called to grow beyond just “attending” the church to **“being” the church!**

**3) USE/USED/USING!** Admittedly, I had many **selfish reasons** for keeping my talents to myself, as well as some suspensions that the church was just trying to **“use me”** (*take advantage of me*). The pastor, however, knew something I did not. Each of us **are gifted – by God – for a reason**. And it’s in using those God-given gifts that we begin to find real meaning and purpose, and a joy that words can’t express. That 3<sup>rd</sup> World Committee was *lead by God* to discover an organization that paired up us with a sister church in Haiti. But at that first meeting we *never* would have guessed that a year later we would **living with, worshipping with, and even preaching to** Christian brothers and sisters in the poorest country in the western hemisphere. We *never* would have guessed the **spiritual impact** that would have on our lives, ...or that it would lead to dozens of other mission trips, ...or that it would result in the building of a *church*, and *school*... or that it would expand to other countries. And I suspect none of us could have comprehended the tremendous **joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment** that lay ahead as we were **“used”** by God!

**4) LOVE AND GIVE!** Many today experience this broken world and conclude **“You’re born, you live, you die.”** But *deep down inside*, most of us suspect, or hope, or know that **there must be more** to our existence than that! In fact, after discovering His **unconditional love** for us, we rejoice to also find a promise of **real purpose!** Instinctively we know that **“just to exist”**, (that is, just to *take up space, use up air and other resources*), and then *perish* without a purpose or meaning attached – *makes no sense at all*. But in Christ’s sacrificial love **God’s purpose** is revealed, and... for those willing to be *embraced* in that love – it reveals **our purpose** too: we are called to **love and give** – both to **God** and **one another**. See, we’re not just *born*, we’re *born* to **love and give**. We don’t just *exist*, we *live* to **love and give**. We don’t just *die*, we move on to *eternal loving and giving* in its purest form! But until our *time in heaven* comes, we’ve been offered a divine purpose here on earth: **to reveal who God is, through our loving and giving**. Clearly our protective instinct not to be *taken advantage of*, is **understandable**, but perhaps today we may want to ask ourselves **IF** there **IS** a time when **“being used”** – that is, being *“used” by God* to **love and give** – might actually be a **life-giving thing?**

**5) GIFTED!** In this sermon series we’re already talked about how God invites us to **reveal His love** through faithful use of our **“time”** and **“treasures”**. But today we explore how we *love* and *give* and *reveal God through our talents*. And we **all** have them! Yet, too many have been *beaten down* by the world and *duped* into believing that we are **not really gifted, or talented, or special** in anyway. Is that you? But Christ, who designed and breathed life into you – **knows better!** God declares today that you **ARE gifted!** That you can be more than just a **consumer** of the church – you can **“BE”** the church! That is, you can actually **become** Christ’s hands, feet, and voice to a needy world. See, the Lord doesn’t make *junk* – and each of us are blessed with the capacity to **love** and **give** in *unique* and *extraordinary* ways! You’ve been **gifted** with **special talents** to help carry on His mission: to **reunite** His missing children with Himself through **loving and giving**.

6) **YOU!** Believe it or not, **you are special!** **You** have been chosen and equipped to reflect the Lord's light to a dark world, and to **carry on** His gracious plan of salvation! Yes, **you!** Uniquely gifted in grace to love and give in a special way! **Ephesians 4:7** "But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. <sup>8</sup>Therefore... He gave gifts to His people.' ...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." So *why* were **you** given talents and spiritual gifts? To build up the body of Christ, until all are **reunited** and **filled** with the Spirit of Christ! **You** have been chosen! **You** are special in that **you** have been given **God's grace** in the form of gifts. Hence **you've** a reason for living: to **serve others** by *loving* and *giving* to them with those "spiritual gifts" according to Christ's will! Imagine it; **you** - *gifted in grace* to build up the precious body of Christ!

7) **POWER!** Wow, that's both cool and a little scary! Imagine, *each of us* being invited, equipped, and "used" by God "**to fulfill the mission of God whenever and wherever the opportunity is presented.**" But *doing* God's work - that's a *big task*, and *are we up to it?* Well, not if we stand alone depending on our own power. Alone, we're weak and everything seems **impossible**. But God never **asks us** to do something without first **equipping us** and **empowering us** to do it! Take the disciples for instance; a group of ordinary fishermen, tax collectors and misfits, told to make **followers of all nations**. And yet on the day of **Pentecost**, the **Holy Spirit** descends upon them, fills them, giving them **spiritual gifts** and **power** – and they go out boldly and **preach** powerfully to people in various languages, saving **thousands** that very day. Look what happens when a handful of *broken people* are blessed with **power** from on high, given a spiritual gift, and "used" by God: the Christian church explodes and spreads across the world, distributing **hope, faith, and love!**

8) **CHURCH: GOING OR BEING?** Today, 2 kinds of congregations exist, 1) those filled with nothing more than people "**going**" to church, and 2) those who are filled with people "**being**" the church. *What's the difference?* Those who are "**being**" the church **know** that the *heartbeat* of the "body of Christ" is the **Holy Spirit!** And they have recognized that the **power** that enables us to **be** the church comes through **baptism**. Because in our **baptism**, the Holy Spirit enters, a call to serve is extended, and a spiritual gift is given! If a fellowship is *unaware* of this fact – the congregation begins to believe that "**ministry**" belongs to just **a few** exceptionally gifted people. What results is a **handicapped congregation** that doesn't realize it is a potential "**storehouse of power**" just waiting to be mobilized and unleashed! Too often there is apathy and conflict in churches because they are **unaware** of what power is available to them! People in God's family are *more gifted* than they know! Are you one of them? Are you **going** to church or **being** the church?

9) **SPIRITUAL GIFT!** In every new member's class we give out a **spiritual gift inventory**. (But they're available to *anyone* who wants to take one). The inventory's *main purpose* is to help growing Christians understand that they are **equipped** in a special way to **serve God!** No one has to choose or create their own **spiritual gift**; **God** has already done that! Our job is **let God help us** to *explore* and *discover* what **already exists!** Do you know what **your spiritual gift** is? Are you prayerfully and

purposely uncovering it? Are you *using* it? Because if you **use** your **spiritual gift** you will discover a way to reflect God's love in a unique and powerful way!

**10) GIFTS THAT DIFFER!** There are about **20** spiritual gifts listed in the Bible – and it is very clear that none of us get **all** of them. In fact, most of us get **only one**, or maybe a **unique combination** of 2 or 3 spiritual gifts that reveals 1) God's love for diversity, and 2) His desire for us to work together. **Romans 12: 4-8** “**For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.**” Obviously this list is *not complete* – in fact, we have to go to several texts to come up with a more complete list – but Paul is simply listing a few to try and make a couple of important points:

- **We do not all have the same gifts!** They **differ** according to the grace given us! **We differ** - *on purpose!* God gave us our individual gifts not to conform but complement one another.
- **No one has all the gifts!** Well maybe Jesus! But God *intentionally* gave us **gifts that differ** so that we would need each other to function properly. **Interdependent relationships** are the priority of God. He designed us to need each other! So **no one** is “an island”, **no one** has all the **gifts!**
- **Our gifts do NOT belong to us!** There are not to be used for **selfish gain**: they were designed for the *glory of God!* And... our **differing gifts** **belong** to the body of Christ! People often say, “*I can be a Christian without having to be a part of the church!*” Well, not according to the Apostle Paul. We were **designed** to be members of one another. We are each a part of the puzzle! Alone, we are **incomplete**. Withholding our spiritual gift from the rest of God's family, handicaps their faithful response to God! Our **differing gifts** belong to one another! We are a part of the whole!

**11) FRESH MEAT!** One of the greatest **barriers** to “*being*” the church, is when our initial “giving attempts” find us... well, “*less than than satisfied.*” Who of us haven't shared ourselves and found that experience **less than joyful?** For that, **the church** itself is often to blame. Let's say a regular visitor (Jean Smith?) begins to look like she may stay... behold, the “**sharks**” begin to circle! You know; “committee heads” who have an opening in their ministry. Do they inquire about Jean's spiritual gifts? No! All they see is a warm body: “**fresh meat.**” And they're aware that “other sharks” are circling too. The first one to close in gets “first bite” – inviting them to join... oh, say the *evangelism committee*. Knowing **nothing** about evangelism, Jean is assured that she will fit right in – don't worry, the committee will **teach her** everything she needs to know. “Well,” she thinks to herself, “They say it is better to give than receive, and this congregation has been so friendly... oh, why not!”

**12) WILLINGNESS TO SERVE?** Three months later *Jean is missing*. Someone says, “I hear she's attending **another** church.” Someone mutters something about the lack of commitment in young people today, and they all walk away **oblivious** to what caused this dilemma. When leaders smash “**square pegs**” into “**round holes**” – *it doesn't*

work! Friends, the “**willingness to serve**” is not enough! When we *ignore* a person’s spiritual gifts, we risk creating a **joyless opportunity to serve**. The volunteer **feels bad**, because they **ARE** “giving”, but it brings *no satisfaction*. “**Something must be wrong with me!**” they decide, while *sneaking* out the back door, never to be seen again. But had that person been given the **freedom** and **encouragement** to seek out and use their spiritual gift, they would have found these **three blessings**: 1) Their spiritual gift **energizes** and *excites* them! 2) Using it gives a sense of **fulfillment!** And 3) It results in **success!** If your “**willingness to serve**” does **not** result in being **energized**, **fulfilled**, and **successful** – you are **NOT** using your spiritual gift! You have *God’s permission* to go explore something else!

**13) IMAGINE!** **Imagine** what a church would look like if **every person** served God with their spiritual gift! **Imagine** the **power** of Christ being released! **Imagine** the **joy** experienced in **working together** like the parts of a healthy body **work together!** Are **you** experiencing that joy? Are **you** serving in way that generates **passion** and **excitement**? Are **you** “**being**” the church, or are you just **going** to church? You have been *uniquely gifted*... are you **actively engaged** in the **excitement** of “an adventure with Christ”, or are you just *existing*? Remember, Christ will not **demand** you *use* your gifts; there are no “**have to’s**” in a loving relationship – only “**want to’s**”. But as we learned last week, **loving is giving!** So **imagine** being an active part of a church that knows that it is **the act of giving** that shows **who God is!**

**14) LOVE ONE ANOTHER!** Jesus once said, (John 13:34-35) “**I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.**” And Jesus *showed us* what “love” looked like when He *willingly* went to the cross, and paid the price – **for us**. His **pouring Himself out** demonstrated **the very nature of God!** So, should we *give* our talent because we “have to”? ...or because Christ lives within us, and we can’t help it? Is not **sharing** our spiritual gifts one of the ways we **love one another**?

**15) BEING USED BY GOD!** A growing number of you in this church family have *answered* those questions and are *increasingly* open to **being used by God!** Some of you with the gift of **service** are regularly **feeding the homeless** at Kent Covenant. You gladly chop lettuce, open cans, wash dishes, serve the main dish, or clean up later – and *you don’t feel taken advantage of*. “**Used**” yes, but **by God** - to touch the lives of others with His love through your giving. Or take **Cheri Staples**, who has the gift of **administration**, who observed the **storage problem** in the church and instinctively knew what has to be done! *Flow charts* and *problem solving* has led to the three **storage containers** that eliminated the clutter in the fellowship hall allowing more **freedom** and **ministry** opportunities. Or take those with **building skills**, who heard the need for **another classroom** and converted open space into a place where small children experience the love of Jesus on Sunday morning. When someone is *using* their spiritual gifts, they **KNOW** that we each have a **unique way** of reflecting God’s love – and in their own way they pray daily something like this: “**Father, I know you are doing some incredible things in your world today. Please give me the privilege of getting in on some of what you are doing!**” It’s a prayer that can only come from someone who has experienced the thrill of **being “used” by God!** As the **gifted people of God** – *is this our prayer?*

**16) GOD LOVES YOU!** Remember, the scriptures say that **God** made you to be you, just the way you are; divinely hand-crafted for a **specific purpose!** He built in certain *abilities, talents,* and **empowered you** with a spiritual gift at your baptism. Do you believe that? You are like **no one else** in the universe! And **God loves you** just the way you are! But He knows your life will be *fuller* and *richer*, when you begin to realize that **life** is *all about relationships*. **Interdependent relationships** - with **Him**, and with **others!** Do you live this truth? ...using your talents and gifts **to love others** as **God loves you?** If you were to surrender your own goals and **trust** in His purposes to bring you *true life* – could you be anything but **blessed?**

**17) LOVING IS GIVING!** Christ is here today... to ask you to *look around you*. The people sitting nearby are the **Body of Christ**. He invites you to experience the *delight* of using your gifts to **complement theirs**, and **work together** to build His Kingdom! He calls you to stop just attending church and start **“being”** the church. He’s **working miracles** in the world today, and He longs to empower you to **join Him** in making those miracles! Because **“loving is giving”**, He’s here to fill you with His **Holy Spirit** that you might *reflect love* through the **active use** of your talents and spiritual gifts to  **bless others!** It is His hope that you discover the **life-giving thrill** and **joy** of “being used” by a **loving** and **giving** God!

**Praise God!**

**AMEN!**

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**Sermon/Confessional Prayer:**

Dear Heavenly Father, we confess that using our talents and spiritual gifts to serve you and others is not always our highest priority. We’re fearfully cautious and suspicious that pouring ourselves out for others will leave us empty or feeling taken advantage of. We hear your invitation to experience true joy and the thrill that comes from discovering and using our gifts – and hesitate to accept it. Forgive us, and empower us to step out in faith!

Lord, sometimes we have a hard time believing that we are special, like you tell us! It is hard to believe that we have been gifted with grace in a unique way to bless others. Forgive us for our doubts, and burn into our hearts the assurance that being used by you to reflect your love to others is the greatest and life-giving purpose for our lives. Fill us now with your spirit, and free us to love others through the faithful use of our talents and spiritual gifts.

And now Lord, although you know us better than we know ourselves, listen as we share in a moment of silence, those other parts of our lives that need to be forgiven, washed clean, healed, and recommitted to you! (made anew.)

(Silence)

Lord, you showed us your true loving and giving nature by what you did for us on the cross! Help us to do now what you designed us to do – each in our own unique God-given way. Come live within us that we may bring our differing gifts together to be the true and life-giving body of Christ! In Jesus Name We Pray. AMEN

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**Assurance of Forgiveness:**

Friends, listen to the good news: The Lord, *the creator who created you to love and give, ...that* Lord has mercifully heard your confession and eagerly forgives you all your sins. Go now, and remember: Loving is giving. It's fearlessly trusting that God built in certain *abilities, talents, and empowered you* with a spiritual gift at your baptism. And don't be afraid to be used by God – it brings the greatest of all joy! Praise God! AMEN

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**Opening prayer:**

Dear Heavenly Father, we enter this sanctuary on this Commitment Sunday always in tension. We're thankful for the progress you have made in our hearts, but also well aware we have so much more to learn about serving and loving you! And yet you embrace us warmly and love us right where we are. We are awed that your grace, mercy, and compassion continue to pour down upon us despite some of the selfish things we have done, and some of the righteous things we did not do. We come eager to be washed clean through your blessed gift of forgiveness. We offer you our emotional, spiritual, and physical wounds, yearning for your gift of healing. We bring you our questions, and frustrations, and anxieties, seeking the solutions that come through your unlimited gift of guidance and knowledge. We come because you have never withheld from us these gifts of life! As we recommit ourselves to you this day, we offer you our time, talent, and treasures – we offer you our lives! Help us Lord to recognize, receive, and use our gifts to reflect your love to all we meet. Use us to bless others wherever and whenever there is an opportunity! In Jesus Name We Pray! AMEN!