

If you knew for a fact that you were going to receive a Valentine's Day present, where would you want it to come from? A jewelry store? Target? The Apple Store? A Hardware Store? I suppose it all depends on what type of gift you're hoping for.

In his first letter to the Christians at Corinth, the Apostle Paul urges them to seek spiritual gifts that are more "Hardware store" than "jewelry store." In other words, Christians are to seek spiritual gifts that will help us serve, not strut.

Now, the church at Corinth was a congregation with problems because the members were not unified. Some had even taken their squabbles to court where they sued one another (1 Corinthians 6)! In spite of their shortcomings, there was at least one commendable thing about this congregation. It was a congregation that eagerly desired spiritual gifts. Can the same be said of us? Do we eagerly desire and pray for spiritual gifts, or do we spend more time asking God for other things?

Maybe a reason we don't pray more often for spiritual gifts is because we don't know what to ask for. The Corinthian Christians didn't have this problem. They knew what they wanted. They wanted the spiritual gift of being able to speak in tongues. This gift was given for the first time to the disciples at Pentecost. That day, the Holy Spirit gave them the ability to speak in foreign languages they had never studied before, for the purpose of communicating the news about Jesus. That's pretty dramatic, but it had a "Hardware Store" purpose—to serve others with the Gospel and build them up in the faith.

The Apostle seemed to sense that there were some in the Corinthian church who desired the gift of speaking in tongues not so much for "Hardware Store" reasons, but for "jewelry store" reasons. It wasn't in order to serve, as much as it was to strut. That's why Paul was careful not to downgrade the gift of tongues itself—but to emphasize that spiritual gifts are not for glorifying the self but are to be used to reach into the lives of others. They are for building up other people. They are not for self-conscious strutting, but for serving that forgets the self because it is more concerned with making another person's life better.

Again, Paul wrote: "Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, strive to excel in building up the church" (1 Corinthians 14:12). It was a good thing that the Corinthians wanted spiritual gifts, and so if they wanted the gift of speaking in tongues they were to also ask for the gift of interpreting what they said. Paul wrote: "If you are praising God with your spirit, how can anyone who does not understand say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying?"

You may be giving thanks well enough, *but the other person is not being built up.*” (1 Corinthians 14:16, 17)

That’s always the bottom line, according to Paul. Simply put, God gives believers spiritual gifts that are only good if they’re put to use to benefit other people. Now, I realize this is a really specific message today, but let me suggest to you that it touches two very deep things in us in maybe a little broader way.

The first thing is, Paul does not want the Corinthian Christians or us to fall back into self-justifying behavior. Do you know what that is? It’s when you develop a spiritual identity based on doing good things. You fill up a stat sheet with good behavior and you make that your trust. Paul knew it is all too easy to take a spiritual gift and just add it to our personal resume, saying, “look at how good I am.” And it’s a tiny step from that to feeling superior to others who don’t have my gift. In a pretty nice way, Paul is saying, “Don’t do that.” One of the ways you know if you’ve stopped trying to self-justify and started trusting in Jesus justifying you is how you use your spiritual gifts. It’s no longer to pad your stats or inflate your resume but it’s just to build good things into someone else’s life.

The second thing is tremendously positive. When Paul directs us to use our spiritual gifts to benefit others, he’s pointing us to one of the keys to spiritual, mental, emotional and even physical health. Here it is: we are at our best when we are helping others. The Bible made this claim about 2,000 years ago, and it has only been confirmed by modern psychologists, doctors and counselors. When I stop obsessing over my problems, and my situation; when God moves me to look up from my self to really see others; when the Spirit convinces me to look away from my worries to instead be a blessing to someone else, that has a profoundly positive effect on my own heart and mind. As one person put it, “It wasn’t until I got out of my own head that I started to feel better,” and that’s what she had discovered: we are at our best when we are helping another person. That’s what Paul is saying. Use your gifts to build someone else up and you will be moving in a healthy direction.

Paul summarized his thoughts like this: “Brothers, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults” (1 Corinthians 14:20). When children learn a new skill they like to show it off to anyone who will watch. As we mature, however, we are to realize that the things we are good at doing are not meant for show but for service. No one understood this better than Jesus. When he performed miracles, there was no strutting involved. Even though each sign showed that he was the Son of God, his actions always benefited others. For example, Jesus fed the five thousand because there were hungry people who needed feeding, and he did it in a very subtle way. In fact, he shared the glory of this event with his disciples, since they were

the ones who distributed the bread and fish. Even the greatest thing Jesus had to offer, his sinless, perfect life, he used for the benefit of others when he offered himself on the cross to pay for our sins.

So it's time to take an honest look at the gifts God has given you. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12 verse 4 that "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone." And he mentions things like wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues and the interpretation of tongues, helping, organizing, and as we dealt with last week, giving agape love. What's so great about what Paul does here in 1 Corinthians is he says there are all these gifts, and some of them are amazing, quite frankly, but, if you have love in you—if you have love in you for someone else—you can do this. Let's do this. Let's strive to use our gifts to build up the church.