

## Sixth Mark of Maturity - Personal Ministry

*"Personal Ministry - Recognize your spiritual gift(s), so you are consistently and faithfully investing your gift(s) in a personal ministry (1 Pet. 4:10; 1Cor. 12:7; Rom. 12:6-8)."*

### Introduction

Our Sixth Mark of Maturity deals specifically with how to develop your own personal ministry. These are the basic steps: first, recognize your spiritual gift; second, invest yourself in the growth and exercise of your gift; third, go through the doors of opportunity, which the Lord opens making a greater investment of your gift; and fourth, ultimately your personal ministry becomes self-evident. There is a final test of one's personal ministry: you know that the Lord has called you to this ministry and to quit you can't simply go to the pastor or elders. You know you can only resign to your Lord. Often times these steps take time. It's not a ten-minute process and many times not even a ten-month process. The Lord determines the amount of time it takes. Our responsibility is simply faithfulness to the grace He has poured into our lives.

A second introductory comment is that ministry is a necessity. As we will later look at the nature of spiritual gifts we will realize that every Christian is given at least one spiritual gift. It is a Christian's birth right (Eph. 4:7). No Christian is exempt! A spiritual gift is given for ministry. Ministry is its purpose. Therefore, ministry is not optional but essential.

### Two Tiers of Ministry

There are two tiers of ministry in the Church. First there are those Christ gives to the Church whose ministry is to equip others. The Greek word used to designate these is *dorea* (Eph. 4:11). Ephesians 4:11 lists the fourfold equipping ministries: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. These are given to the Church to equip the Body of Christ through ministries of God's Word - preaching and teaching - and through the ministry of shepherding - modeling, nurturing, and discipline. Thus, their ministry is to equip the second tier of ministry: *"for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph. 4:12)*. This equipping process is to enable *"the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up itself in love" (Eph. 4:16)*. Here is the blueprint for the development of gifts and ministry and the proper functioning of the Body of Christ.

### When the Ministry of Church Breaks Down

It is not difficult to see how the whole dynamic of the Church's ministry can break down when the Church fails to function according to God's plan. The result is that ministry doesn't get done. Complacency replaces enthusiasm. Luke-warmness replaces zeal. The Body goes dormant. It is like watching a great clock wind down till it stops.

There are some obvious symptoms. First, there is a waning in our personal walk with the Lord. Remember Jesus' instruction to His disciples *"apart from Me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5)*. When we are not tending to our personal walk, then we hear no call to ministry. Our hearts are not strengthened with the joy of the Lord. The call of the world drowns out His call to ministry. We seek our own self-fulfillment rather than self-denial and the way of the cross. For this reason our first Mark of Maturity is your "Personal Walk."

The second symptom comes fast on the tail of the first. Our hearts become filled with the reservations of a thousand reasons for not being involved in ministry. When you lose your "first love" you never seek first His Kingdom and righteousness. Jesus said it simply: *"No one can serve two masters" (Mt. 6:24)* ". . . *for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt. 6:21)*. Remember, our three enemies: the Devil, the flesh, and the world, are always pressing us, scheming against us, seeking by every means to rob us of our "first love." They seek always one thing - our destruction. They desire for us the epitaph of Demas - *"Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me" (2 Tim. 4:10)*.

## **Excuses**

We hardly need anyone to remind us of the excuses which flood from our hearts: "I don't have time," "my family needs me," "it's my only day off," "I have to work," "after work and my family I don't have anything left," "I don't know how," "I need time for myself," etc., etc., etc. Remember, the "good" always tends to be our excuse for not doing the "best." Jesus said, "Follow Me." One said, "permit me first to go bury my father." Jesus said, what? "Sure, I understand, no problem. I'll just wait here till you have some time to spare. I know you have a thousand things to do, and since I have eternity no problem. I'll be here whenever you have time for me." Hardly! *"Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the Kingdom of God" (Lu. 9:60)*. Another said, "first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." That sounds reasonable. After all you don't want my family putting out an "all-points bulletin" on me do you? Jesus said, *"No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God" (Lu. 9:62)*. Jesus said these things to sober us. We too quickly take the "good" and excuse ourselves from the "best." We play games, and Jesus will have no part of it. He cuts through our excuses and rationalizations with the abruptness of a bucket of cold water in the face. His point is this - until you see My call upon your life as first, above everyone and everything else, you will never see your life or Me rightly! You will live in your delusion. Our delusions are so thick, our rationalizations so entrenched, that without such a radical, sobering, and amputating call we will simply continue merrily on our treadmills.

## **Balance in Ministry**

I realize, as Jesus realized, that there are many responsibilities to be fulfilled in our lives, but they must be given priority and rightful balance: Jesus and His Kingdom first, family second, work third, and then recreation. A stewardship pie is a helpful tool. First, the whole pie belongs to Jesus, so we see ministry to Jesus expressed as we care for our families, as we invest ourselves in our livelihoods, and as we are renewed in our recreation. We are ministering in the name of Jesus in each of these areas just as we are when we are ministering in the Church and to the world. Divide your pie into slices: ministry to the world, the church, your family, work, recreation, etc. Make the slices proportionate to the time you give them. Each of these slices will balloon because of situational demands: a demanding project at work, a family need, special Church ministries, etc. In these times we must readjust the other areas, but only for a time. Then when the special demand is over we must readjust all areas back to their rightful proportion. There are at least two questions we need to ask ourselves regarding our personal pie. Does it represent the balance and proportion which the Lord wants in your life? (If Jesus were looking over your shoulder would He say "that-a-boy"?) Second, if it's out of balance what do I need to do to put it in balance?

To develop your personal ministry, you must be sober with yourself and any excuses you use to procrastinate your ministry's development. Also, you must regularly evaluate your priorities and make the changes, which need to be made. Another insight to this process is to maintain the focus of your energy on your spiritual gift while still cultivating a servant's attitude to all opportunities.

A pastor wrote of his personal experience of burn out and explained that for no reason at all he would start to cry uncontrollably. He evaluated his priorities, and, as objectively as possible, he believed everything was in balance, but he still found himself on the verge of tears and less and less energy for ministry. He eventually realized that the bulk of the demands of his ministry had him working outside of his spiritual gifts, and the result was emotional and spiritual exhaustion. I can immediately relate. My primary gift is teaching. Study, writing, reading, and research are the background activities of a teacher. I am happiest doing these things. I have energy for them. I can start early in the morning and continue until late into the night and start all over again the next day wishing only that I had more time. Administrative responsibilities have just the opposite effect. They wear me out. Phone calls, meetings, overseeing activities and events, etc. drain me. I avoid them. Make me administer program after program so that I have no time to study, and I'm like a balloon with a tiny hole. It's only a matter of time till I am flat.

When we focus on our giftedness we have enthusiasm, energy, joy, but when we move out of our area of giftedness and usually the joy of ministry starts to leak and drain. The genius of God's plan is that the Church is made up of a multiplicity of gifts. The Spirit gives the gift of teaching to one and the gift of administration to another. When the Church is ministering in each one's giftedness there is a joy in ministering, but there is a rejoinder to this principle. There are times when I must do the work of administration, whether I like it or not. I do it not for the joy but for the need of it being done. I do it as a servant. Often times people are recruited out of need and that's OK. We must always cultivate a servant's attitude in ourselves - humility, willingness, diligence, faithfulness, etc. But we must recognize that our greatest joy and energy for ministry comes when we are ministering in our area of giftedness. It is here that we find our personal ministry.

Finally, there are times to rest from ministry, but rest is not becoming Rip Van Winkle who slipped into a 40-year snooze. Rest is not refusing to be stretched. Rest is for re-creation, for gaining strength, for clearing the mind and heart, for enjoying peace, for putting courage back in your heart, for refreshing our souls and renewing our bodies. Some need more rest than others. Some need it more frequently, some less. What we need most is to seek is a balance. We are not sprinting in ministry. It is a distant run, so we must pace ourselves. We must rest when we need it, and then we need to get back in the race.

## **The Critical Ingredient for Developing Your Ministry**

*"About spiritual gifts. . . I do not want you to be ignorant,"* were Paul's words to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 12:1). God's Word is clear that recognizing your spiritual gift is extremely important for your spiritual growth and ministry. Here are three reasons: (1) Your spiritual gift(s) is part of your identity as a Christian, i.e., the grace of God that saved you also equips you (Eph. 4:7; Rom. 6:23). (2) Your spiritual gift is given so you, both individually and in harmony with the rest of the church can fulfill the ministry of Christ both in the church and in the world (1 Cor. 12:7; Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Pet. 5:10f.; Eph. 4:16). (3) To neglect this special grace which God gives for ministry stunts our spiritual growth and paves the way for more serious spiritual disease (1 Thess. 5:19-20; Eph. 4:14; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6-8; Rom. 12:3; 1 Cor. 12:14-26).

## **Definition of a Spiritual Gift**

There are several principal passages which deal with gifts: Romans 12:1-8; 1 Corinthians 12-14; Ephesians 4:7-16; and 1 Peter 4:7-11. The Bible's favorite word for a spiritual gift is not "spiritual gift" (pneumatikos) but "grace gift" (charisma). Unfortunately, most Bible translations do not make this distinction. Further, a spiritual gift, besides being an expression of God's grace, is a manifestation of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:7, 11). In other words, a spiritual gift is the result of the Spirit's activity in your life, and even more the Spirit determines which gift(s) you will receive. A

third element of the makeup of a spiritual gift is that it is a concrete expression of ministry. This is to say, a gift is always real, not abstract: it is not the potential of what might be, but what really is; it is something we can take a picture of, touch, hear, feel, or see. It is a divinely inspired act of ministry. Two things support this. First, the construction of the Greek word used for gift, and secondly, the illustrations of all the gifts mentioned in the New Testament. The fourth element of a spiritual gift is that by it we testify to Christ's Lordship as we minister, i.e., the act of ministry performed is done in His name, whether stated or unstated, and as an act of worship to Him (1 Cor. 12:3; 1 Pet. 4:11; Mk. 9:41). The fifth and sixth elements go together. Fifth is that spiritual gifts are to be utilized in harmony and coordination with the other spiritual gifts of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-30; Eph. 4:11-16; Rom. 12:4-8). The Body is ill when its members are not properly functioning and working. Sixth, the legitimate expression of God's grace for ministry, a spiritual gift, must be characterized by love (1 Cor. 12:31-13:13; Eph. 4:14-16). Otherwise God's grace becomes warped into something fleshly (Rom. 8:8). Putting all this together we come out with the following definition: "A spiritual gift is a particular act of ministry. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit and enabled by God's grace. It demonstrates Christ's Lordship, works in harmony with the other gifts given to the Body of Christ, and is characterized by love."

### **Common Questions**

Because of limited space it is difficult to touch on all the many questions so often asked about gifts, but here are a few. Is a spiritual gift a natural talent? It is not by definition. Yet, a spiritual gift may be manifested through a natural talent, but this is not always the case. A person may be a teacher professionally (a natural talent), and yet his or her gift for ministry may not be teaching but, for example, faith. A natural talent becomes a gift only when the Spirit ordains it for God's purpose (1 Pet. 4:11) and as it becomes an act of ministry in His name and for His glory. Is a spiritual gift a fruit of the Spirit? No. The Spirit's fruit (Gal. 5:22-23) are the result of the Spirit's work to conform us to the character of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18), while a spiritual gift is the Spirit's enablement for ministry (1 Cor. 12:11). Are all spiritual gifts listed in the New Testament? No. Each list is different from the others, and each list was directed to a different situation, which suggests that the needs of the church determined the grace given. Our definition of what a spiritual gift is would further support this. Are all spiritual gifts supernatural and charismatic? Yes. They are given by God through the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:7), therefore they are supernatural. They are "charismatic" (an English transliteration of the Greek word meaning "empowered by God's grace") because all gifts are various forms of God's grace (1 Pet. 4:10). Some gifts are extraordinary (healing, miracles, etc.), while others are very ordinary (helps, administration, etc.); but both are equal expressions of God's grace; so therefore they are charismatic. Did some spiritual gifts pass away when the apostles died (apostolic period)? No. There are legitimate expressions of all the gifts listed in the New Testament, but it must be immediately noted: there are many counterfeit gifts evidenced today (cf. Mt. 7:22-23; 2 Thess. 2:9). There are several Biblical tests for counterfeit gifts. Later, we will make mention of some of these. Gifts will pass away at the Second Coming of Christ (1 Cor. 13:8-12). Are spiritual gifts endowed permanently or temporarily? Both. On a given occasion God's grace may enable you to perform a certain ministry, but that does not mean that gift will be a permanent manifestation of the Spirit in your life. For example, Paul wrote to the Corinthians urging them to prophesy (1 Cor. 14:5), but they by a single prophecy did not become prophets (cf. Eph. 4:11). A prophecy was a single act; the prophet was the regular manifestation of the grace. So it can be with all gifts.

### **Safeguards Against Counterfeit Gifts**

As I mentioned above there are counterfeit gifts from basically two sources: 1) Satanic (2 Thess. 2:9; 1 Cor. 12:3) and 2) fleshly (1 Cor. 13:1-3; 14:26-33; Rom. 12:3). There are several safeguards given in Scripture to detect and protect the church against such counterfeits. First, does the gift make a confession of demonstration of Christ's Lordship (1 Cor. 12:3). Second, does it

manifest love (1 Cor. 13:1-3). Third, the Spirit provides gifts to counter-balance other gifts, e.g., prophecy and distinguishing of spirits, tongues and interpretation of tongues. Therefore, we must ask the question is the counter-gift in agreement with the gift manifested? Fourth, does the gift edify the Church, so they can affirm the act with their "Amen" (1 Cor. 14:16)? Fifth, is the gift in agreement with apostolic message (1 Cor. 14:37)? Sixth, has the gift been exercised beyond the measure of faith given (Rom. 12:3, 6; 1 Cor. 14:30)?

## **Steps For Recognizing Your Gift**

Finally, we come to the five general steps in recognizing a spiritual gift(s). I use the term "recognize" because ultimately it is only in the process of doing ministry that we can "recognize" the grace God has given us. There are certain preparatory steps, but the bottom line is that you will recognize your gift only as you attempt to minister in the name of Jesus. Here are the five steps:

### **1. PROSPECT (1 Cor. 14:12)**

Spiritual gifts have been given to edify the church and in so doing to reach the world for Christ. So a basic question needs to be asked, "Where does the church need to be built up?" God often reveals needs to an individual as a first step for him/her to recognize his/her grace for ministry.

### **2. PRAY (1 Cor. 14:13)**

Once you have seen a need, ask God to equip you with the grace to meet that need.

### **3. PRESENT (Rom. 12:1)**

You must now make yourself available. Take a step of faith and begin to minister. To present yourself in ministry is true worship. It is to say "here I am, use me!"

### **4. PROBE (Rom. 12:3; 1 Cor. 14:16)**

Now comes the twofold evaluation: first, you must evaluate yourself (Rom. 12:3). Was I used to build up the church, to meet a need to help? Was there fruit? We are not talking about perfection here, but some approximation of edification. Second, some brothers and sisters in Christ should evaluate you (1 Cor. 14:16). Others should be able to recognize that God is using you, as well as, you should be able to recognize it yourself. If you realize after you have "probed" that what you thought was your gift you is not don't give up! It does not spell, failure, but rather it is a discovery of what is not your gift, therefore return to the first step and start over again. God has given you a gift, and you have no choice but to continue until you and others recognize it!

### **5. PURSUE (1 Tim. 4:14; 1 Thess. 5:19-21; Rom. 12:6; 1 Pet. 4:10)**

Often disappointment, fear, complacency, misplaced priorities, low self-esteem (to name a few) can cause the neglect of a spiritual gift(s) and put out the fire of godly desire which the Spirit has inspired. Once your gift has been confirmed, don't quit! Continue! Gifts must be developed, matured, and used! Remember "pursue" - press on (Phil. 3:13-14)!

## **Obstacles**

Many Christians remain immature in their faith. They never grow up in Christ. In reality they are spiritually ill, weak, and are unaware of their condition. Often this can be traced back to an unwillingness to recognize their spiritual gift(s). This unwillingness often stems from one or more of six reasons: one, fear of the Holy Spirit. They have this fear because they are not Biblically informed as to the ministry of the Spirit, so they are afraid of what might happen if they seek their gifts. Second, ignorant or ill informed about spiritual gifts is a common reason a gift is not recognized. The issues of tongues, baptism in the Spirit, healings, etc. often cause confusion and avoidance of spiritual gifts in general. Third, a low sense of self-esteem which issues in the attitude, "I can't do anything," or "I'm not good enough," can create personal barriers to the recognition of

one's gift(s). Fourth, looking for the wrong thing is a major reason why many never recognize their gift. Many when seeking his or her spiritual gift are seeking some kind of experience or emotional high rather than a divinely inspired and enabled act of ministry. Ministry by its very nature and the example we have in Christ is costly. It is becoming a servant. Fifth, the unwillingness to make a commitment is another reason people do not recognize their spiritual gifts. This means we must be willing to reprioritize our lives, throw away our excuses, and sign on the dotted line to take up our crosses and follow Him. Sixth, unconfessed sin or unconquered sin habits inhibit both the recognition and the effective functioning of one's spiritual gift. Repentance and confession are necessary steps to dealing with sin in our lives.

God's will for our lives is that we recognize our spiritual gifts. To not do so, for any reason once we have been informed about spiritual gifts, is to violate God's will for our lives, but, perhaps more importantly, to miss the tremendous blessing of being used by God in your personal ministry and the accomplishing of His great purpose in history is a tragic loss of opportunity and calling. Our need and our calling are to recognize our spiritual gift and develop our primary ministry, which will flow from our giftedness.