

You are Gifted
How are you using your gifts?

There was an ancient king who lived along a great river. It was a beautiful, prosperous land filled with natural and architectural wonders. The king had great wealth and power and enjoyed all the delights that such circumstances could offer. He led a life of luxury and indulgence, with every need met, and he had absolute authority over his people. But one night, the king's sleep was disturbed by terribly unsettling dreams. The dreams left a sinister aftertaste, and he found he could not rest until he knew what the dreams meant. He immediately consulted those in his kingdom who were thought to have wisdom and insight, but to no avail.

After much searching and frustration, one of the king's servants finally suggested an unlikely source. The servant knew of a man currently in prison who had a reputation for understanding dreams. The prisoner was brought before the king, and the dreams were recounted. The prisoner correctly saw that the dreams warned of a coming famine, and without immediate action, the kingdom would become a wasteland. The prisoner proposed a plan to harness the bounty of the land before the famine started, and to use it to survive the disaster that was to come. Seeing the true wisdom of the man and his plan, the king elevated him to a position of power in the kingdom, and through his plan, the king and his people were saved. And not just those in the kingdom, but many from distant lands as well.

Well, you may recognize this story from Genesis 41 where God raised Joseph up to help warn pharaoh of the coming famine. The Bible tells us that through the Spirit of God inside of Joseph, Joseph was used to save the Egyptians and later his own family who came from Canaan. If you haven't read this passage in a while, I would encourage you to go there sometime and read the whole story for yourself. There are many parallels between that biblical episode and our current time. In Joseph's time, a period of famine was preceded by a period prosperity, and the resources provided during the time of prosperity were distributed to survive the time of scarcity. In the story, we also see that God knew what was coming and had a plan, and although it was certainly a time of difficulty for many, God was in control through it all.

The parallel that I want to focus on and explore in greater detail today is the way that God chose to save people from the famine. Through the Spirit of God living in Joseph, God blessed an ordinary man and used him to speak and act on His behalf. The almighty God of the universe used a broken, undeserving vessel to accomplish His divine plan. How encouraging that can be to us! God has blessed each of us, broken though we are, with unique gifts and has set before us uniquely wonderful, supernatural and natural works that He has prepared for us to act on on His behalf and demonstrate His love to the world.

Have you felt like the hands, feet, and mouthpiece of God lately? By the end of this message, I hope it will be clear to each one of you listening and watching out there how richly God has gifted you, and further that He has a purpose for how you are to use your gifts right now. We'll also answer a couple of key questions related to this blessing and work:

- Why is my role important?
- What does it look like to use my gifts biblically?
- How specifically can I use my gifts to bless others during this time?

Why is my role important?

We are the body of Christ and through us, as we noted earlier, He literally speaks to and touches the world.

- I Corinthians 12:27: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." We can represent the physical body of Christ here on Earth. His Spirit is active in us, and our physical actions are a mechanism by which God chooses to physically act.
- Ephesians 2:10: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." We were created to do good works. This is our purpose! In this we glorify God, and we should go forward with confidence, knowing that He prepared the way.
- Matthew 5:14-16: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." We are called to be the light of the world, and clearly this is not accomplished by withdrawing. We are called to step

out and share the love of Christ with those around us, and once again we see that this work glorifies Him.

All of these verses confirm that God uses us to physically touch the world. We are called to act, and this is to His glory.

We are all part of one body, and within that body, we each have a different set of gifts. Romans 12:4-6: "For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them."

You have unique gifts, including skills and personality, that have prepared you for a role that only you are capable of carrying out. God made you uniquely for His purpose. Each one of you also has a unique circle of people in your life, and you are positioned by God to reach them and show them God's love in a way that no one else can. If you don't step up and put your gifts to use, those people will not receive that blessing. The entire body of Christ, the church, is able to minister most powerfully when every member is actively engaged to do the good work in front of them, leading to a compilation of works that is greater than any one person.

An analogy that can highlight this is when a band plays. Each musician is talented and capable of producing beautiful music, but the true power of the music is felt when all of these members play as one band, creating a depth and magnitude of sound that surpasses each individual. When we use our gifts together with others in the church, the combined efforts generate a movement that reflects the creativity and intimacy of the creator who orchestrated it. At the same time, just as with a band, where a single member failing to contribute fully to their piece prevents the music of the whole band from achieving what it could, so the role of each individual member of the body is crucial in accomplishing the whole work set before us.

What does it look like to use my gifts biblically?

We are called to express our faith through action, out of love, because our hope is not in the things of this world.

- Colossians 3:23-24: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”
- Hebrews 13:16: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”
- Galatians 6:9: “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”
- I Timothy 6:17-19: “As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.”

A couple additional take-aways from these passages on doing good and persevering, are the importance of generosity and acting out of a desire to serve with an eternal perspective, rather than a focus on our position here on Earth.

God has also provided direction for how we are to take action, or more specifically on whose behalf we should be working. We are to care for those in need. This is a mandate that is addressed throughout the old and new testaments. As we read through a couple of these verses, remember these are the direct words of God. It’s easy to hear them and let them pass without asking ourselves how well our lives reflect this standard.

- Proverbs 14:31: “Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.”
- Proverbs 21:13: “Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered.”
- I John 3:17-18: “But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”
A call to step up.
- Matthew 25:34-46 – This is the one that hits me hardest. This passage describes the day of judgment when Christ returns. “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a

stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

After hearing this, we should be stirred in our souls for this work. We see how greatly God cares for those who have troubles. It is a part of His great mercy and love, and as we know He changes our hearts when we are saved, we should strive to have the same heart, seeing those in need through the eyes of God with the same love and care that He has. It is a high calling, and a warning. I don't want to live my life with complacency, making excuses for a lack of follow through or even worse blind to the work God is calling us to.

How specifically can I use my gifts to bless others during this time?

Depending on where life finds you today, you may not be feeling particularly gifted. In fact you may be in need of a blessing from others at the moment. Even if that is where you are, you are still an essential part of God's work here, and you have unique opportunities to show His love. Let's dig into that further.

An important first step is to take time to stop to look at how God has blessed you, and then ask Him how He would have you use that gift. How often do we carry on without taking time to ask Him what He would have us do? I know I tend to say

my routine prayers and then hurry on with life without truly taking time to wait for any input from God. That's not how it should be.

A few examples that we'll cover today are financial, service, and spiritual gifts.

Just as with other gifts, not everyone has been blessed in the same way with financial gifts, but just as with other gifts, God gave them to us to show His love. Certainly there are circumstances that may arise that disrupt our normal participation in supporting God's work financially, but if you have the opportunity to participate in this and you're not, you are missing out on a blessing. There are few things in this world that better show us where we're storing up our treasure than where our money goes.

Looking at the giving reported at East Lincoln since this pandemic started, I am encouraged by the generous spirit shown by the members of this church. Clearly God is moving and using you to financially support His work during this time. Let's talk about what that giving is accomplishing.

- Here at East Lincoln, there are many ministries supported by tithes and offerings that help our church and community grow in faith and save the lost. They also help meet physical needs of those who turn to the church for help. If you're watching today, but East Lincoln is not where you normally attend, I would guess the same could be said of your home church.
- We at East Lincoln are also partners with many missionaries abroad. We should continue to support with them in prayer, but they also rely on our financial support, and it is such a blessing for us to be able to partner with them through our normal giving. The Corona virus has impacted the entire world, and if we can allow those working in foreign lands to remain whole and continue their work, they may be able to shine a light in dark places with even more opportunity at this time.
- Godly giving also does not have to be limited to the church. If God puts an opportunity in front of you to directly bless someone in your life, DO IT! It may not be money that they need either. Show them that God's love is not just theoretical.

We can also be generous in spirit and in service. Here are some examples.

- We can be intentional about reaching out to others to listen to them, encourage them and support them. Within the church and outside. Especially during this time of increased barriers, we have means of lifting someone up from afar with a kind text, email, phone call, or letter.
- Pray for others, and when you do, let that person know you're doing it. Ask others for specific needs, and follow up with them. You may find an opportunity to meet a need of theirs yourself.
- If God gave you a spirit of peace and joy in this time, share it! There are many who are dealing with stress, anxiety, and sadness, and sharing your joy and peace could lift them up.

Many in our body have been blessed with great skills in one area or another, and if God puts an opportunity in front of you to use that skill to bless someone, do it! This could take the form of helping with a project or even going shopping for someone who has difficulty or concerns about going out themselves.

This can take so many forms, and the point of this message is not to list every possible means by which God could use your gifts. Hopefully though, right now, you are asking Him to show you what gifts He has given you that He is planning to mobilize to bless the world at this time. If we ask God to use us, we can expect that He will reveal ways for us to show His love to others.

I want to share now of a time recently when I experienced this type of blessing from someone else in my own life. My wife has been working through an online graduate program for the past few years, which also happened to be when we started having kids. During that time we've gone through periods of unique stress when life felt overwhelming and utterly exhausting. Many times during that period, we felt completely depleted. This last year, a friend here at church had asked how things were going, and when I shared that we were in the middle of a time of particularly high demand, they decided they wanted to cook dinner for us, to help give us a break.

When I got home from another late night at work to my wife who was bent over our computer, holding the baby and exhausted from trying to get her school work done while taking care of our little girls all day, that hot, delicious, gourmet meal that had been sent home with me, created in us such a wonderful sense of blessing that we felt overwhelmed in a different way. It was as if God Himself,

through that friend and their meal, was saying He loved us and He cared about our struggles. It was a simple act, but a great encouragement to us.

I hope we all can think of a time when we experienced such a blessing. I know my own experience had a powerful effect on my life, particularly because I was vulnerable to being blessed in a way that I wouldn't normally feel when life was not so difficult. And now when many people may be experiencing challenges, we have a unique opportunity to be that blessing to them.

Final thoughts

Let's answer the questions again.

- Why is my role important? We are the hands and feet of God on Earth, called to shine His light and love, and each of us is uniquely gifted to do our part.
- What does it look like to use my gifts biblically? We are to take action and meet the needs of those who are struggling out of love with an eternal perspective and a desire to serve God.
- How specifically can I use my gifts to bless others during this time? The answer is unique to you. Seek it out through prayer, reading His word, working to soften your heart to be able to hear Him speak, and seeking input from trustworthy brothers and sisters in the faith.

We are many blessed and imperfect parts of the body, but acting out of a unified spirit of love, we can move in powerful ways in our community and the world. This is how God sees us and the church.

As we resume our lives after this message, I pray that God will continue to work in each of you to see how richly He has blessed you, regardless of your current circumstances, and that you will take time to ask Him how He would have you use that gift. Let's take action together and shine His light.