

Series: OUT OF THE ORDINARY - May 25, 2008

**WHEN A GREAT PLAN COMES TOGETHER!
1 Corinthians 12**

I. INTRO

- A. I'll bet most of you can remember exactly where you were on September 11, 2001, 8:46 a.m., when the first of four hijacked airliners slammed into the World Trade Center—followed by another hitting the second tower, and a third hitting the Pentagon. -What amazed people—and scared them even more—was the concept of Al Qaeda **cells**—small groups of people hidden in communities around the world. Meeting, planning, supporting each other—and willing to lay down their lives for a cause they believe in. And behind it all is a master plan to kill as many of the enemy as possible. -What if... **what if...** there was a greater plan, a better plan—to **give** life instead of take it? What if, all over the globe, there were many more small groups—meeting, planning, equipping, training—but doing all this for love, not hate; for a Leader who is the Sovereign of the Universe—not hiding in the hills of Pakistan?
- B. Truth is—there **is** a plan. It's perfect, because God Himself arranged it. It's unstoppable, because His power is behind it. And it includes me...and **you**—because it includes everyone who will be a part of it. -Here's the deal—you and I—**we—together**--can make **way** more of a difference in this world—not just for now, for eternity—than we ever dreamed possible. I want to sketch out **how...**and then you have to decide whether or not you will be a part of it. Is that fair?

II. SO...ABOUT THE GIFTS

- A. First, let me read part of what Paul, Apostle and early church leader says about this plan to followers of Jesus in the ancient city of Corinth:

Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

(1 Corinthians 12:1-6 TNIV)

Now, based on these verses, can anyone tell me what it is that takes this plan **totally** out of the realm of the ordinary? **God is behind it!** It's not just one of His little side projects, it is **His** plan to restore this planet and all it's people to what it/what **we** should be. The Lord of all is supernaturally at work in every person who follows Him—giving them the gifts, the power, and the opportunity to influence and impact the world. And **His** plan is eternal. What He's up to will last forever.

-Let me give you a little set-up before we deal directly with this passage. When Jesus died, rose from the dead and ascended to the Father—He sent the Holy Spirit to carry on His work through His followers. He was clear about his mission to reach the entire

world with the Good News of His coming. But He was clear, “Don’t even **try** this without the Comforter—the Holy Spirit.”

-The Spirit unified Jesus’ followers and gifted them with supernatural abilities—spiritual gifts—to carry on His work.

1. Well, it was Spirit’s coming, recorded in Acts 2, that created the church. The Spirit thoroughly changed people—gave them power to speak God’s Word convincingly; power to be kind and generous and loving—even in the face of hostility. What took place was amazing. And it was **contagious**.
2. But sometimes people wanted the **power** of the Spirit and His gifts without a servant heart. And that is the specific problem Paul had to deal with in the Corinthian church. People who wanted to appear spiritual—more spiritual than others.

-See, these people thought that having certain gifts—specifically, the gift of tongues--made you more spiritual than others who didn’t have those gifts. And that issue still comes up today. Connected with this is the belief that specific gifts are the evidence that the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in you—that you’ve been **baptized** with, or **filled** with the Holy Spirit.

3. So Paul has to address the issue of what it is that makes a person spiritual, as well as what the gifts are actually all about—and how they are all supposed to work together, not splinter God’s people into a bunch of little disconnected parts competing for the spotlight.

B. Let’s take a walk through what Paul writes to this church.

1. The first thing Paul says is that being **ignorant** about spiritual things and spiritual gifts is not a good thing.

Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:1-3 TNIV)

- a. The word translated as **gifts of the Spirit** could also be translated as **spiritual things** or **spiritual ones**. Based on what’s going on in this church—with their spiritual arrogance, I think what Paul is saying is, “So, let’s **talk** about spirituality. You think you’ve reached some spiritual pinnacle because of the gifts you’ve been given—**let’s talk about that**—because if you go on in your uninformed way, you’ll do more harm than good!
- b. Something else. All spirituality—everything that **seems** supernatural isn’t good—or from God. Paul’s reference to them being **influenced and led astray to mute idols** deals with what used to happen when the Corinthians worshipped pagan gods. Sometimes they would go into a trance-like state—babbling and totally out of control. And yet even though it created a spiritual high—it had **nothing** to do with Jesus as Lord. In fact, they had to be delivered from it.
-Here’s the deal. Satan is one of the best counterfeiters there is. What sometimes appears to be spiritual has absolutely **nothing** to do with spirituality. If Jesus is not at the center—it’s false—and it’s dangerous.

2. The next thing that Paul teaches about the gifts is that there are a **lot** of them—almost an infinite number of combinations of gifts, personalities, contexts, opportunities to serve, and groups of people to work with. **But**—they are all unified into **ONE** mission by **ONE** God. Here's how Paul puts it:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. (1 Corinthians 12:4-6 TNIV)

-Notice how this is stated:

*Different *kinds* of gifts—same distributor; the Spirit

*Different *kinds* of service—same One in charge; the Lord

*Different *kinds* of working—but at work in the core in everyone—is the same God.

-The Bible lists a whole bunch of different gifts.

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines. (1 Corinthians 12:7-11 TNIV)

-Notice the variety here: People who know what to do, what to say—at precisely the right time. There are people who have a gift for study—and what they learn actually stays in their brain. There are people whom God uses to bring supernatural healing to those who are physically or emotionally broken. There are people God speaks through—and their message cuts right to the heart. Some people can walk into a situation—and immediately sense that what's going on is not of God—and not right. Some people have the ability to speak or pray supernaturally in unknown languages—and some can interpret precisely what God is saying through them.

3. God has given a **lot** of gifts to His people. It includes being able to make things run well; the ability to lead; the ability to make and give significant sums of money to support God's plans for the world. Some have the ability to help others in strategic ways, or the ability to care for a group of people. Others have great faith and trust in God—and are a great encouragement to people who are in dark times. The ability to teach God's word with great clarity. That's just **some** of the gifts.

-It gets even bigger. People have different combinations of gifts; and how and where people use these gifts is **also** incredibly varied. Think, for example, of just one gift; the gift of encouragement. Someone might use this gift with children or teens or adults—or with those who have severe limitations—or with the poor—or in another culture—or in their neighborhood. And it could be used

through speaking, or singing, or playing an instrument, or bringing meals, or providing money, or praying, or fixing cars.

4. Here's a question some people ask: How do I get a spiritual gift? Like, can I have any one I want? Do I need zapped? Well, this passage answers some of those questions.

a. Here's the first thing you need to know. When you put your faith in Jesus, the Spirit of God takes up residence in your life. When He takes up residence in us, He gives us gifts—abilities—to engage in meaningful ways in what He's doing. **Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.** As I look at the gifts, I see that God sometimes empowers our natural talents—or works through them in supernatural ways. A person maybe has a gift of public speaking or teaching. The spiritual gift works through that natural talent and changes hearts in supernatural ways.

-Here's the bottom line. If you have chosen to follow Jesus—**you have been given at least one spiritual gift!** Sometimes people say things like, "I wasn't given a gift!" They may not have **found** their gift—but person who has put their faith in Jesus has a gift.

b. Second thing: The gift you've been given is for the **common good**. The gift isn't for your private enjoyment or spiritual development or to make you prominent or special. It's for **others**. It's given to you to make you effective in **servicing others and advancing God's mission in this world**. To use it to advance yourself—or strut your stuff is the **worst** kind of misuse!

-In a world like ours, this is startling news. People tend to think that spirituality is something you practice in private to make you a better person. The Bible says that to even stay **alive** spiritually, you need others. We're part of a body—which is the illustration Paul uses throughout this passage.

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

(1 Corinthians 12:12-14 TNIV)

-Do you see the significance of what this is saying? What would happen if one of your body parts got separated from you? **That** would be a problem, right? What would happen if one of your body parts, like your heart, decided it didn't like the way it was being treated—and was going to take a 3 year vacation? **That** would be a problem!

c. And that feeds right into the next thing you and I need to know about gifts. **All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.**

-Little quiz on this. Who decides who gets what gift? The **Spirit**—not us! We don't like go on this spiritual gift shopping trip at the Wal-Mart in the sky. The Spirit, who sees the big picture of what God is doing, where

we'll be, what **we** need to experience distributes the gifts...just as **He** determines.

-Bottom line? My calling...and your calling...is to work in cooperation with God—to unify with others, to find what gifts the Spirit has given us—and then use them to serve Jesus—and serve others.

- C. Here's the bottom line scoop on spiritual gifts. God has a **plan!** For everyone and everything to be restored and made whole. And He wants to use you and me as a part of it. **That's** why He sends His Spirit into our hearts and gives us gifts. The best illustration of how it works together is the body illustration—because it's living and breathing—there's blood flowing, nerves carrying messages—all the parts helping each other.

-Do you mind if I use a more crass illustration? We are the body parts—we're living, breathing, moving. The gifts represent the tools God has given us to get the job done.

1. Now, think about this in terms of a bunch of people working together to get a house built. One worker has a table saw; another has a hand saw; another has a power-nailer; another has a drill; another has a hammer; another has pliers, wire cutters and screw-drivers to do electrical stuff; etc.

-Now, based on what I've told you, which of these workers is the most important worker—and most proficient carpenter? It's a stupid question, isn't it? All the workers are important; all the tools are necessary—but they're just **tools**. Without a **worker**—tools are nothing!

2. Another tool analogy. How many of you think you could build a house with just a hammer? Better yet—how many of you think you could build an Airbus 380 or Boeing 777 with just a hammer? Not a chance! It's very sophisticated stuff—and takes lots of expertise, lots of time, lots of planning, lots of brain-power—and a phenomenal amount of tools!

-And when one rolls off the line? What do people do—bring out all the tools, bow down to them, take pictures of them—write them up in the magazines they put on jets? **NO!** It's the **finished product** that counts—and all the **people** who made it happen!

3. Here's the interesting thing about what Jesus is doing in the world through His Body; **us—united in one mission:** He is building his Church, He is restoring the world, and He is building us into what he's called us to be—**all at the same time!** Right now, we just catch fleeting glimpses of what He's up to—but one day, the finished product will roll off the line, and we will **gasp** with amazement of what we've been a part of.

-But to actually **get** there takes faith. And cooperation. And a servant heart.

No one just drifts into it. We will have to **choose** to invest our lives—get out of the bleachers and onto the playing field!

III. SO...ABOUT YOU!

- A. If you see this plan of God for gifting us, empowering us, and using us as something that happens in little buildings with steeples on them every Sunday morning—you **totally** have the wrong picture. This includes the local gatherings—but it also includes God's whole plan for making this world right. Friends, this is a **massive** plan—with a universe creating God behind it!

-Here's the cool thing. Again, this is a repeat—**He wants to use us!** See, wherever you find yourself—**He's already been there working!** And He's chosen to use weak, flawed, sometimes scared and clumsy people like **me** to do supernatural things. And

one day, we get a chance to see the whole thing—all put together—and the difference we made.

1. But Paul, this wise leader writing this letter, knows that when God uses flawed people to do great things—sometimes it goes to their heads. They bring the same competitive spirit that runs the world system—right into the church. It puts some on ego steroids—and others, in their insecurity, experience **gift envy**. “Wow! I wish *I* could do that!” So, he gives us this great picture of a human body with all these whining parts.
 - A foot saying, “Waaah! I’m not a hand. I **wanna** be a hand! I’ve got these ugly toes—I spend all day in mud and dirt—I smell!” And the answer? Well—feet are pretty important. In fact, they carry the hands around. This is **gift envy**. Now, in their church it was the gift of tongues everyone wanted. What might it be today? Think, **American Idol**. The combined talent/gift of music, right? Paul says, “So. What if the whole body were one big, bouncing eyeball?” Pretty weird, right? Like something out of **Monsters, Inc. Every part is important!**
 - Another potential problem. People who are arrogant enough to think their gift makes them more important than others. Remember my initial image—of tools? Imagine someone saying, “I’m **most** important because *I* have the saw!” Big deal! It’s a **tool!** You didn’t invent it—or create it!
 - Another issue that sometimes arises when arrogance becomes a problem, like it was in Corinth. Paul says it like this:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" (1 Corinthians 12:21 TNIV)

- It’s people who try to play God and eliminate the gifts they don’t like—or the parts of the church they think are unnecessary. Here’s the truth: **We need each other! At The Olive Branch, we need everyone to bring their gift—attached to a servant heart—and use it for the glory of God and for the sake of others. The world—the work God is doing *needs* you!** It may be a behind the scenes part. It may seem like a small part. It may not seem to be that important. The deal is, you are an indispensable **part** of the Body; the whole Body needs **you!**
2. To summarize, there are some things that followers of Jesus do, when it comes to gifts, that hinders their effectiveness.
 - a. It will hinder your effectiveness is you see gifts as a measure of spirituality. Spirituality is about loving God and others, not what’s in your toolbox—or how good of a show you can put on.
 - b. Don’t believe the lie that you haven’t been given a gift. If you’ve chosen to follow Jesus—and if the Spirit lives in you—you have been given at least one gift.
 - c. Don’t waste your time trying to convince God to give you the gift **you** want. He’s already made that decision! Find the gift or gifts you’ve already been given.
 - d. Be really careful not to make your gift about you. Your gift is a tool—given by God through the flesh and blood of your life to the community of which you are a part.

- e. Don't waste time envying other's gifts. Your gift is different—but **just as important to what God is doing!** Value the gifts of others! Be really, **really** careful not to fall into a jealous, critical spirit. That'll hurt everyone.
3. Listen to what Paul says about the inter-working of gifts in the church.

...Some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen, while the more honorable parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad. All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:22-27 NLT)

-See, the deal is that our body works best—and most efficiently—when all the parts are there—pancreas, liver, lungs, hands, feet, knees, eyes—watching out for each other, helping each other. Your feet carry your liver around every day. The liver's kind of ugly and slimy—but without it, the feet would die. How many of you have a pancreas? How many of you aren't sure? Your pancreas is hidden deep in your body—you're not even sure **what** it does—but it is as much a part of enjoying a concert or playing golf as anything else.

-Here's my point; the gift I've been given isn't about **me!** And your gift isn't about **you!** It's about all of us, working together in unity—helping each other; protecting each other; giving recognition to those who don't usually get it; protecting those who are vulnerable—and suffering with those who suffer.

-Do you get it? It's not how impressive we are personally—how we astound everyone with our use of language or music or prayer or servanthood. Our usefulness to God—and our impact has **directly** to do with how we treat others—and the unity we pursue. Where no one gets cocky or arrogant. Where no one pouts, "If you won't play **my** way—I'll take my dollies and go home!" Where no one gets narcissistic or judgmental or cooler than others. But where we see the magnitude—and the magnificence of our mission—and our leader—and we just give our best!

- B. Oh, by the way, did I tell you what the most destructive thing is that you can do when it comes to your spiritual gifts? I can tell you if you want to know—**do you?** It's to **never find them, never use them—and make excuses about why that's okay.** For almost 1000 years, the church gave the impression that only professionals could do important things.

1. But, see, we're not in that era anymore. Now we know; now **you** know. You have a gift. Even 2 year old knows what to do with a gift. They do it every year at Christmas. What do you do with a gift? You...**open** it, and you...**use** it.
- I can guarantee you that if you never even open your gift—never find out what it is—never make the difference God has called you to make with it—if you never offer your gift back to Jesus—and offer it to the community of Jesus, there **will** come a time when you will regret it.
- In the last week of his life, Jesus told a story about a master who went on a long trip and gave his servants significant amounts of money to invest while he

was gone. Two invested wisely—and doubled the amount. One buried it in the back yard. When the master came back, he called everyone in to give an accounting. The two who invested were honored. But the guy who just buried in the backyard—and whined about how hard the master was? It was not a nice moment!

-Who would the master be? Jesus. Who would the investors be? Well, that would be us. To not even **open** a gift—never even check it out—is really a form of contempt. Oh, I know—I’ve heard all the excuses. Well, see, I’m just **so** busy... Yeah, well, see our kids are at this stage... Well, I’m not sure what to do—I’ve tried a few things and they didn’t work out...

2. How many of you found the job of your dreams on your first try? Second try? Third try? How many of you found the partner of your dreams on your first date?

-Can I just be honest? Sometimes our first efforts at finding our gifts can be frustrating. Even embarrassing. I’ll never forget the first time I ever played my violin in church. I got halfway through Silent Night, screwed up—and stood there holding my violin while the piano finished the song. My first message? My first attempt a counseling? Pretty sad and pathetic. Get this: I preached a series of messages on raising kids **before I had any! How embarrassing and stupid is that!**

-But **not ever finding your gift or your calling?** That, friends, in the light of eternity--is **unthinkable**. This is not about what goes on at 175 Anderson Avenue; this is about God’s entire plan for this world—and our part in it. **This** stuff stretches into eternity. And I can guarantee you—you will **want** to make this a part of your life. Over time, you will find that serving Jesus and others is one of the most powerful, meaningful things you will ever do.

3. Where do you start? Well—today we’re distributing a gift test that may help you narrow things down. Let me ask you this question: What are you already good at? Where do your natural talents seem to lie? What do you **really** like to do? Start there. What do really **not** like to do? What are you really **not** good at? **Don’t** start there! Remember, a gift is simply a tool God has given you for making a difference in the world.

-Second thing—talk to some of the people who know you best. They likely see things you don’t. What do others say you are good at? Remember—this is a learning process—and it will take some time. So—**take** the time! And once you find your gift, like a tool, it takes time to learn how to use it well.

4. The most important thing you can do is to **just start** with a servant heart. Tell God, “I’ll do anything. I just want to help. Anything will do. You’re my Shepherd. Show me. See, that’s what God is looking for. If you try something and you really **don’t** like it—then try something else. It will take time and effort. It will take some thoughtful prayer--and some careful thinking. Remember. God wants you to find and use your gifts more than **you** do! He just needs your cooperation.

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. How many of you think our world is in kind of a mess—and **long** to see things change?

-Dream with me for just a minute. Imagine what it would be like to see nations like Palestine and Israel come together—and for love, not hate, to describe their relationship.

-Imagine a world where pollution stops. Where the oceans and lakes and rivers are clean—where wildlife thrives—where rainforests increase instead of decrease.

-Imagine a world where it's safe to walk down any street; where slavery, child pornography—and any abuse of children becomes a distant memory.

-Imagine a world where marriages and families are healed; where hatred and screaming and cursing stops—altogether.

-Imagine a world where greed in businesses and corporations is despised, and where fairness and generosity reigns. Where people are more important than money!

-Imagine a world where poverty and starvation and want are a thing of the past; where people **gladly** help others; where kindness and generosity and mercy are celebrated as the top virtues!

-And—imagine a world where everyone loves and respects and honors God; a world where his shalom—his goodwill and peace and kindness and wise leadership and generosity are clearly seen—and where His power flows.

-How many of you want to be a part of making that happen?

- B. See, **that** is the big picture of what God is up to on this planet. **That** is why He gave you spiritual gifts—and the power of the Spirit to make a difference. This whole thing, friends—is **not** about us stuffing ourselves into a little building and **doing** church; this is about God releasing us into the world to **be** the church.

-And now it's up to you. Will you engage...or not. It's the opportunity of a lifetime to do what you were **designed** to do. **Don't miss it!**