

“Working With What You Have Been Given”

1st Corinthians 12:1-11

1/21/2001 Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church - Philip Siddons

You know by now that the main reason Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinth house church was they were divided in turmoil. They were a conflicted church for a number of reasons but one of the most disruptive causes was their arguments over spiritual gifts. Paul devoted three chapters of this letter to make two points: ❶ that all gifts come from God’s Spirit but the use of these gifts is to be governed by love. ❷ The most beneficial gifts are the ones that are helpful to the entire body of believers. Paul made this point three times in his career writings and gave his parishioners lists of many of different things with which we are gifted by God.¹

In many ways and for long stretches of our lives, most of us think that we would achieve happiness in life **if** we had something we do not now have. But for as many years as you and I have lived in this advertising-driven society, we know that wealth, fame or power doesn’t really bring us happiness (yet we keep asking the media to show us more).

We look to acquire happiness in self-help books and the psychologists often have some practical advice. Dr. Joyce Brothers recently had some of her work distilled down to ten bullets of advice on achieving happiness.

1. Think that good things will happen.
2. Express gratitude to a loved one.
3. Put your gripes away in a box.
4. Be patient with an annoying person.
5. Do something special for yourself.
6. Reach out to someone who needs comfort.
7. Deeply focus on each moment.

¹ The lists appeared in 1st Corinthians 12: 4-11; 28-30 and Romans 12: 6-8. Spiritual gifts were also listed in Ephesians 4:11-12 – not written by Paul. See a fuller treatment of the issue of Glossolalia and Prophecy by going to: <http://connectedness.org/>

then click on the Sermon Links button  and read the 6/7/1998 file “The Phenomenon of Speaking in Tongues.” If you don’t already have it, you will need to get the free Acrobat[®] Reader[™].

8. Learn from a mistake.
9. Look closely at a flower or tree you haven’t noticed before.
10. Smile.²

What Joyce has done is collect these fragments of ancient wisdom traditions which are embodied in Judaism,³ Christianity,⁴ Taoism,⁵ Buddhism,⁶ Norman Vincent Peale⁷ and New Age⁸ world views. Clearly and unarguably good advice but we all still get stuck back at wanting something we don’t have in order to be happy.

Unfortunately, all Joyce’s list might do is frustrate us even more, because given the day and circumstance, we could find ourselves wanting a more positive mental attitude⁹ or gratitude¹⁰ or the discipline to stop complaining and think positive.¹¹ We could wish we had more patience¹² or a better self-concept so that we would try to meet some of our own needs once in a while.¹³ We could want to be less selfish so we would reach out to others more often.¹⁴ We could finally schedule in our Day Runners[®] or calendar software a meditation class so we could slow down and live in and enjoy the moment for a change¹⁵ but second thought, . . . maybe we could fit that in more easily next quarter. And we wish we smiled¹⁶ more often but then we don’t want to appear cocky and glib.

² See Dr. Joyce Brothers, “You Can Lead A More Joyful Life” in *Parade Magazine*, October 15, 2000 p.6

³ #s 3, 8

⁴ #s 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8

⁵ Confucius, #s 3, 6, 8, 9

⁶ #s 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

⁷ #s 3, 8

⁸ #s 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10

⁹ #s 1, 3, 6, 8, & 10

¹⁰ # 2

¹¹ #s 3, 10

¹² # 4

¹³ #5

¹⁴ #s 2, 4, 6

¹⁵ #s 4, 7, 9

¹⁶ #s 2, 10

In our frantic quest for happiness, slowly turn back to the text and look at verse 7. “To each (of us) is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given, through the Spirit, the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge, . . . to another the working of miracles (if we can’t program the VCR we probably don’t have that one), . . . to another the ability to distinguish between spirits (that’s discernment in sensing sincerity, truth and kindness) and Paul goes on. In all of his writings and lists of spiritual gifts, he isn’t trying to list all of them exhaustively. He’s just tossing out several examples of spiritual gifts, but we may have spent our lives missing something more basic.

Once again, in our frantic quest for happiness, we’ve read these passages and usually have said to ourselves, “O, I wish I had some of this or some of that, . . . then I’d be better at what I do in my life – I’d be happier if I had that!” But we’ve missed the point if we’ve thought that Paul was telling us to ask God for these things.

His point was that these kinds of things are gifts we’ve already been given. You are already gifted by God. No matter what side of the bed you got out of this morning, . . . no matter what you might have your nose bent out of shape about on a given day, you already possess spiritual gifts from God. God made you and God don’t make junk.

You and I already have everything we need in life to make us happy. We are just unaware of it and forget to appreciate what we already possess.

Sarah Ban Breathnach, in her delightful book *Simple Abundance*,¹⁷ tells of a young Englishwoman, Joanna Field, who came to feel she needed to find contentment and live a more authentic life. Intelligently, she started keeping a journal to list the kinds of things in life that did bring her happiness. The point Sarah and Joanna made is that we aren’t happy with our lives because we don’t slow down enough to truly face and claim all the things in life that make us happy.¹⁸ So how happy are you right now, sitting here in these few

moments? Do you even know what brings you happiness in your life?

Perhaps you’re thinking that if you could only get that remodeled kitchen or the new job or the perfect someone with whom to share your life.¹⁹ But, again, that’s just longing for something you don’t already have – a dead end. But here we are, again, going back to wanting something we don’t have.

Well, this author concludes that “Happiness is not a possession to be prized but a quality of thought – a state of mind.”²⁰ In this case, it isn’t a material object or the companionship someone else would bring us. It is, after all, simply one more thing we supposedly don’t have. It is a state of mind.

Here’s where there’s a breakthrough from the vicious cycle of striving to find happiness and peace. Because somehow, we’ve got to break out of the cycle of wanting something else that we don’t have in order to find happiness or fulfillment or inner peace.

The pivotal clue to breaking out of this rut is simply back to what Paul was saying. You and I have been given wisdom, knowledge (know the difference between those two), sometimes the ability to do the miraculous or we may have discernment. You and I have been given the ability to teach, write, draw, organize, have compassion on or are able to help another in such ways as to bring them to healing and wholeness. We have these things from God and yet we’re spending most of our lives “standing knee-deep in a river and dying of thirst.”²¹

So if it isn’t a new attitude, a new motivation or a more positive outlook on life that we need to get, what is it going to take for us to find happiness? You and I will discover it when we turn straw into gold.²² ((Don’t you hate it when he doesn’t give simple, straightforward answers!))

¹⁹ As poses Breathnach in her January 8th posting

²⁰ Breathnach quoting from Daphne du Maurier in *Rebecca* in her January 8th entry

²¹ A song title by Kathy Mattea’s country song, cited by Breathnach in her January 6th entry.

²² The title of the fairy tale “Rumelstiltskin” Jack Kornfield

¹⁷ ISBN 0-446-51913-8

¹⁸ See Ban Breathnach, January 7th entry

The writer and spiritual leader, Jack Kornfield, says the reason we stomp through most of our lives spiritually uninformed is because we avoid suffering and pain. When difficulties arise in our lives, what do we usually do? We meet them with blame, frustration and feel a sense of our own failure. As soon as we can, we try to get rid of difficulties and turn back to something more pleasant.

In the second half of our lives, we sometimes wake up and discover that all the problems and pain we've avoided, denied or from which we've run, are still part of life and in some ways have increased. Life has inevitable contradictions, shortcomings, limitations and suffering. No matter what happens to the fictional television characters in our lives, real life has its joys but undeniable pain. Reality has its triumphs but also its blunt, irrational, abrupt and heart-breaking despair. Ultimately, we are left personally facing the actual problems and contradictions and lack of answers in our lives.

A genuine spiritual path doesn't try to avoid difficulties or mistakes. A realistic and healthy spiritual path brings us to fully face the errors and pain of life fully and unashamedly.

Kornfield suggests that there are two kinds of difficulties we discover in our lives.²³ ❶ First, there are the problems that can be solved that need intelligent, compassionate action and response. ❷ Then there are the problems we create for ourselves by struggling to make life different than it is or by becoming so caught up in our own point of view that we lose sight of a larger, wiser perspective.²⁴

Our trap is that we tend to go back to either wanting something we don't already have or blaming something on someone or something outside us. These traps are just other forms of us forgetting God has already given us gifts of God's Spirit with which to deal with and successfully handle our problems.

suggests as a working metaphor. It is a tale about a maiden locked in a room full of straw until she is able to turn the straw into gold or guess her cruel captor's real name.

²³ See Kornfield's *A Path With Heart*, ISBN: 0-553-37211-4, p.72.

²⁴ Kornfield

But when our pain or difficulties appear, we usually project our frustration onto them, as if it is the rain, the children or the world outside that is the source of our discomfort. We think that if we could just change the world "out there" we could then fix it or get rid of the problem or the pain.²⁵ Ironically, what nourishes our spirit most is what brings us face to face with our greatest fears and most painful difficulties.

Our life has periods and situations of great difficulty and pain that bruise and sometimes withers our spirit. At times, we have heartbreaking mind and spirit-shattering experiences. Sometimes we are faced with the pain or illness of a child or a parent or someone we dearly love. At times, it can be a loss in career, family or business. It could even be our own loneliness or confusion or addiction to fear as a way of life. We could find ourselves forced to live with painful circumstances or oppressive and demoralizing people. But how does what Paul says 'we already have' relate to this pain in our lives?

If we stop striving to get something or someone we don't already have; . . . if we can stop fleeing from the pain and problems in our lives; . . . we can be freed up to use what energy (we have left) to slowly and deliberately turn and fully face that pain or conflict.

In facing our difficulties, we must turn to our inner spiritual life and use the gifts God has given us – that we already possess – in order to become fully present with the conflicts and pain that exist in our lives now. But being present with conflict and pain takes practice. It takes a spiritual practice.

Some of you have a regular and intentional practice of prayer. Some of you meditate and intentionally become present in the moment through an awareness of God's presence and your presence and connectedness to all there is in life that God has made. In your spiritual practice, you have found God's presence to be soothing to the aches of your heart. You have sensed that somehow, the great and uncontrollable forces of greed, hatred, fear and

²⁵ p.73

ignorance in life are met with the courage of your heart.²⁶

You see, as you and I fully face and try to be present with our challenges, trouble and pain, we participate in the greatest spiritual learning of our lifetimes. By facing the things and the people which cause our suffering, we find that our hearts become open. In turning to face our challenges and pain, we discover that we become free. We become free to use our physical and spiritual energy to face our challenges instead of wasting or leaking our energy in running from them. We become free from denying it or depleting our psychic energy over the past or the what if's of the future.

As we turn to courageously face our fears and the pain of life, it will require our most compassionate attention. But what we already have from God are gifts from which we will find strength and healing.

Your God-given patience will help you wade through issues and the facts you have to discover in order to find further resolution. Your God-given discernment and wisdom will help you take in more from others – to keep you from snap-reactions that prohibit most people from wisely weighing the implications in more people's lives than just their own.

Whether it is aggression, compulsion, greed, stress, fear of loss, conflict, depression or sorrow – your initial response may have been to avoid dealing with these conflicts. You may tend to want to “get rid of the problem” or run away from it because it is unpleasant. It's just too much work and it all seems so impossible, so beyond you.

But God has already equipped you with what you need to face your difficulties. When your body is sick, instead of fighting the disease, use your resources and listen to the information your body is telling you and use it to heal.²⁷ When your child whines or complains, instead of shutting them out, insisting on stifling their unpleasantness in order to maintain your control, listen to their deeper need.

²⁶ Jack Kornfield's section on “Turning Straw Into Gold” is so brilliant, it approaches poetic expressions of spiritual truth. See his section on pages 71-81.

²⁷ As Kornfield explains on p.78 & 79

When you have difficulty with a person closest to you, look at how you treat them as part of yourself. Because of what God has already given you with which to work and live, your difficulties or weaknesses will lead you to the very thing you need to learn.

So our spiritual learning will be a path that calls us to take the least traveled road. The very way we usually approach (or avoid approaching) a problem will have to be set aside. The path of growth will be one which calls us to let go of the easiest and most familiar. It will be a path where we will have to learn to develop the tools God has already given us that we, perhaps, haven't yet used. But in taking that path, we will find joy and healing because we will find God in the center of it. Because God has always been the Source of our inner strength and the Giver of all of the talents we've had all along. ■

