

Spiritual Gifts, Part 6

Mercy (Helps) and Giving

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Mercy

The gift of showing mercy is a broad gift which includes visiting and attending the sick; caring for the poor; showing love and compassion toward orphans and widows; and, showing kindness to believers who are suffering emotionally, who may be going through a personal crisis. Although this gift applies to the diaconate and the order of widows (1 Tim. 5:9ff.), it is not to be restricted to the deacons' work. Indeed, it is something that all believers should cultivate as a Christian duty. "Since our God is a merciful God (e.g., 12:1), his people must be merciful too."¹ "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Mt. 5:7).

Those who are to show mercy are not to do so begrudgingly with a negative or sour countenance, but must do so "cheerfully." The purpose of the gift of showing mercy is *not* to make the afflicted feel sad or to cause them to think they owe some type of debt; but rather, to raise their spirits, to bring joy to the heart and a smile to the face. "This spares the feelings and soothes the sorrows of the afflicted." Calvin writes, "For as nothing gives more solace to the sick or to any one otherwise distressed, than to see men cheerful and prompt in assisting them; so to observe sadness in the countenance of those by whom assistance is given makes them to feel themselves despised."² Interestingly, the Greek phrase *en hilaroteti* translated "with cheerfulness" could literally be translated "with hilarity." The Christian who helps those in distress is not to be a stoic figure or automaton. He must be a figure of robust joy and even laughter. "How much we need a cheerful, hilarious spirit in the church!"³ The idea that Christians must always be grim and dour is clearly legalistic and unbiblical.

Giving

Another gift that Paul lists is the gift of giving (Rom. 12:8). Some commentators believe that the apostle is speaking about the formal church office of deacon where men are gifted in distributing church funds to others. The immediate context (where those who give are told to give with "generosity" or "simplicity") however, indicates that Paul is probably speaking about giving to others out of one's own private resources.

¹ John Stott, *Romans*, 328.

² John Calvin, as quoted in John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2:127.

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, 4:1587.

The phrase that Paul uses to describe how a Christian is to give (*en haploteti*) can be translated either as “with simplicity” or “with generosity.” If the apostle is referring to simplicity (cf. 2 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22) then he is warning believers to give with “singlemindedness of heart, of motive, and of purpose.”⁴ A believer is to give without ulterior motives only to the glory of God. If Paul is referring to giving with generosity then he is instructing the givers to give sacrificially, bountifully or liberally. This passage calls to mind the poor widow who gave even though in a state of poverty—“she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood” (Mk. 12:44).

Something as simple as giving can have a great impact on history for good or for ill. It is very likely that no one would have even heard of Karl Marx (the father of modern communism) had he not been supported by his wealthy friend Frederic Engels. In the Protestant Reformation great reformers such as Martin Luther and John Knox greatly benefited from the charity of godly princes. Christians who cheerfully and bountifully give unto the Lord lay up “treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Mt. 6:20).

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[HOME PAGE](#)

⁴ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2:125.