

In 1 Cor. 12, the apostle Paul told the Corinthians that each member of the church was to be one of the constituent parts of a unified whole. He told them that he didn't want them to be without knowledge regarding spiritual gifts, and their function and operation within the body of Christ. As part of his instruction, he asked them:

"Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?" (vs. 29-30)

The answer of course was, and still is, no. But then he said a very interesting thing: he told them to "eagerly desire the greater gifts" (v. 31). And in chapter 14:1, he told them they ought to especially desire the gift of prophecy.

That begs the question: can a man heal others or prophesy by an act of his own strength, or by desire alone? No, of course not. Although one might have the will to do so, the ability itself is a gift given by God and all such gifts are distributed according to His will alone. As John the Baptist observed, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven." (John 3:27) So why, then, did Paul encourage the church to earnestly desire spiritual gifts? Is it possible that God chooses to distribute the gifts of His spirit based at least in part on how earnestly a person desires them?

As you consider that question, please turn in your bible to 2 Chr. 1:7-12, where you can read about an extraordinary occurrence. In those verses we are told that God appeared to Solomon at night and said to him, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." Imagine yourself in that position: having assurance from God himself that whatever you ask for will be granted to you. What would *your* request be? While you're considering your answer, let's look at Solomon's response, in verses 8- 10:

"Solomon answered God, "You have shown great kindness to David my father and have made me king in his place. Now LORD God, let your promise to my father David be confirmed, for you have made me king over a people who are as numerous as the dust of the earth. Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may lead this people, for who is able to govern this great people of yours?""

Solomon could have had anything. Have you ever wondered why he prized wisdom so highly that he asked for it above anything else? Solomon himself supplies the answer. In Proverbs 4:3-9 he wrote,

"When I was a boy in my father's house, still tender, and an only child of my mother, he [referring to King David] taught me and said, "Lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live. Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my

words or swerve from them. Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding. Esteem her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you. She will set a garland of grace on your head and present you with a crown of splendor."

What a beautiful example of a father teaching and training his son to love what is right and good! Through his instruction, King David planted the seed of desire for wisdom in Solomon. Because he had love and reverence for his father, Solomon heeded that instruction and fixed his heart upon it -- and so when the LORD appeared to him he knew what he wanted most -- and his earnest desire was rewarded.

For the next example, please turn with me to Gen. 32:24-30. It reads:

"So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." Jacob said, "Please tell me your name." But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

If any of you have ever had an occasion to wrestle with someone, you would know that doing so for just 5 minutes can be physically exhausting. Jacob wrestled from night until early morning. Against an angel! (Hosea 12:4-5) As impressive as that is on its own, I would ask you to immerse yourself further into the account. When the angel saw that he could not prevail over Jacob, he gave him a demonstration of his power by dislocating Jacob's hip, then commanded him to let him go. Can you adequately appreciate how imposing that experience would have been? Can you feel the hint of potential threat behind the angel's command: as if he were saying, "Let me go, NOW, before I am forced to hurt you even worse."

Some additional background on the pathophysiology of a dislocated hip might be helpful here. The hip is a modified ball-socket joint, bolstered by a fibrous joint capsule, and many strong muscles of the upper thigh and gluteal region, and so the joint is very stable. Because of that, a large force is required to dislocate it -- a degree of force typically produced by a motor vehicle crash or a fall from height. Simply put, dislocating your hip would get your attention. How did Jacob respond to that physical trauma and

the angel's subsequent demand? He said, "I **will not** let you go unless you bless me." In that moment, all of Jacob's will -- his energy, strength and focus -- was centered on one thing, to the extent that even the intense pain of a dislocated hip could not distract him from the object of his heart's desire.

What was it that Jacob was seeking as he wrestled with the angel? Wealth? A life of pleasure and ease? Fame? Adulation from the masses? No, he sought a spiritual blessing and because of his fervency he received his desire, his name was changed and, in spirit, he became greater than he had been before. I cannot think of a better physical example of how spiritual faith is supposed to work in our lives. Jacob knew in his heart what it was he wanted and needed most -- which was to be blessed by God. He began with a right desire, he believed God could and would provide it, and then he set his will with all of his might and refused to let go until he received it. Oh, my brothers and sisters, if only we were all more like him!

Solomon and Jacob are only two of the examples that can be found in the Scriptures where individuals received spiritual blessings because of the integrity and earnestness of their desire. Now that we've discussed them, I'd like to return to my earlier question: Is it possible that God chooses to distribute the gifts of His spirit based at least in part on how earnestly a person desires them? Aside from personal stories, do the Scriptures have anything else to say on the matter? Jeremiah 17:10 states,

"I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve."

Additionally, Deuteronomy 4:29 and Jeremiah 29:13 both state that a person seeking God will find him if and when they seek him with all of their heart and all of their soul. The negative implication is that God will not reveal himself if you seek him with a divided heart. Nothing less than 100% integrity is accepted by him. Would not the same principle also apply to receiving spiritual gifts? Considering how exceedingly precious the gifts of His spirit are, do you believe that God would bestow them upon someone with a tepid interest in them? I have often heard the question asked, "Why don't we see prophesying, healings and miracles today, like we read about in the Book of Acts?" If you simply accept as an answer that God just isn't working in that way anymore, how earnest would you say your desire to receive those gifts is? Would Solomon have been so easily dissuaded? Could Jacob have been turned aside by such a pat reply?

More importantly though, spiritual gifts are given for the purpose of benefiting others, to draw them to a right relationship with God, and to bring honor and glory to His name -- so if our words and our deeds show that our hearts are set more on the things of this life

than for rendering service to God and our fellow man, why would we expect to receive them? If we don't believe we're incomplete and inadequate without them, and feel a deep need for them, like Solomon and Jacob did, it is unreasonable to expect to possess them. I say that because although God can supply what we lack, only the truly hungry beg to be fed. The simple truth that God has brought me to understand, then, is that His power is not more evident and on display in my life because my love of self is still too strong and my love for Him and for His service is still too weak. And if His power is not manifest in your life, the reason is the same.

Before moving on, there's one more Scripture I'd like to turn to. Hebrews 11:6 states,

"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."
(Earnestly seek -- there are those words again!)

The first part of that statement is self-apparent: no one seeks for God if they don't believe he exists. But why is it impossible to please God without believing that he rewards those who earnestly seek him? One reason is that an earnest or diligent search implies that considerable effort is involved. A brief example to illustrate that point can be found in Proverbs 2:3-5:

"Indeed, if you *call out* for insight and *cry aloud* for understanding, and if you *look for it* as for silver and *search for it* as for hidden treasure, **then** you will *understand* the fear of the LORD and *find* the knowledge of God."

Unless a person is fully convinced the reward is worthwhile, they will be either half-hearted in their effort, or entirely unwilling to do the work. There is an opportunity cost involved in seeking God. We can only learn his precepts and judgments through prayer, bible study, and service to others. Doing those things requires time that is not spent on entertainment or other pursuits. For example, in Luke 9:57-62, we read:

"As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family." Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

What then is the cost of following the Lord? Nothing less than everything. The question then becomes, "Is that a price / am willing to pay? We can read that Peter once remarked that he and the other disciples had indeed left everything to follow Jesus, and so Peter asked him, "What then will there be for us?" (Matt 19:27) In response Jesus said:

"I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And **everyone** who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake **will receive** a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

My brothers and sisters in Christ, do you **truly** believe in your Lord's promise? Remember then that he also said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matt 6:21) If your treasure is truly in heaven, and you believe that the reward which awaits you there is far superior to anything that can be enjoyed on earth, is there any loss you could suffer in this life that would shake your faith or lessen your resolve to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness?"

The apostle Paul taught that "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:22) Could he and the rest of the apostles have persevered through all of the adversities they encountered in serving the Lord if their greatest hope and treasure did not rest firmly in God's Kingdom? Their decision to follow Jesus required them to make a decision as to how they would use their time on earth -- a decision that you and I are faced with as well. They gave the entirety of their life and devoted all of their energy and time to promoting the Gospel, which testifies to the love they had for God, and the value they placed on their promised reward.

This leads me to my next point. The last time I spoke, I concluded by mentioning that my next message would be about love for God. Have you ever thought about the fact that how we spend our time is one of the main ways we show our love toward God? The author of Psalm 84 had it in his heart to write:

"How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God." (vs. 1-2)

He also observed, "Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere." Have you ever thought about what a day with God would be like? How would being in His presence alter your perspective and change the things you live for?

Consider what the apostle Paul told the Corinthian church:

"I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know -- God knows. And I know that this man -- whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows -- was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell." (2 Cor. 12:2-4)

Do you think that experience was impactful? Do you think it would have been still vividly etched in his memory years later when he wrote to the Philippian church, saying:

"But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him ..." (Philippians 3:8-9)

So often, we live as though this physical life is the ultimate reality. Having seen paradise firsthand, Paul knew with certainty that such is not the case, and when he reflected on everything that he had once lived for in light of what he now knew, he considered all he had left behind to be garbage. So consider everything you currently live for -- the goals and dreams you're pursuing. If you had seen paradise, would you not have a burning desire to return to it? Is there anything on earth that would be capable of capturing and holding your interest? Would your goals remain the same? Paul said there weren't words to describe what he saw there, and yet even as inexpressibly beautiful and wonderful as that experience must have been, it still cannot possibly equal being in the actual presence of God himself. Nothing can compare to the peace and joy that come from being at one with the Perfection of Holiness and Love -- and yet how readily and willingly do we trade time spent with Him for pursuit of fulfillment in the temporary pleasures of life!

So far, I've given two examples of individuals who received spiritual blessings based on their earnest desire and also provided evidence indicating that serving God requires faith and consistent commitment to seeking Him. I'd like to move on now to expound on a passage that highlights the seriousness of the responsibility the Lord's followers have with regards to use of time. Luke 16:10-13 states:

"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest [or unrighteous] with very little will also be dishonest [or unrighteous] with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you

with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

This is an exceedingly important passage for anyone who desires to serve God. The subject matter goes far beyond a mere discussion of money and its use. The focus is really about the correlation between service to God and entrance into His Kingdom. The principle behind Jesus's statement that "whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much" is well illustrated in the Parable of the Talents, found in Matt. 25:14-30, so I won't elaborate further on that point. Instead, I'd like to focus on the question he poses in verse 11: "if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?"

There is clearly a contrast being made between "worldly wealth" and "true riches," so what is the intended meaning of those terms? To begin, the translation "worldly wealth" is derived from *adikos* (ad'-ee-kos), which can mean unjust, unrighteous, sinful or deceitful, and *mammonas* (mam-mo-nas'). Thayer defines it as:

1. mammon
2. treasure
3. riches (where it is personified and opposed to God) -- of Aramaic origin, signifying confidence.

With those definitions in mind, a fuller sense of "worldly wealth" could read: treasures or riches which are opposed to God, since man unjustly places his confidence in them, instead of trusting his Creator and Provider.

Next, the word translated as "true riches" is *alēthinos* (al-ay-thee-nos'), which Thayer defines as:

1. that which has not only the name and resemblance, but the real nature corresponding to the name, in every respect corresponding to the idea signified by the name
 - a. opposite to what is fictitious, counterfeit, imaginary, simulated or pretended
 - b. it contrasts realities with their semblances
 - c. opposite to what is imperfect, defective, frail, uncertain

This physical realm is imperfect, frail, and uncertain. It is only a semblance of the spiritual reality: so true wealth can never pertain to material things, it can only apply to things which are spiritual in nature. So now, I would ask you: do you think Solomon

would have defined the gift of wisdom as "true riches"? Would Jacob tell you that to be blessed by God is to be truly rich? What testimony would the apostle Paul give? Would he counsel you to trade the gifts of the spirit for gold or treasure?

Now reframe the logic of the argument the Lord made in Luke 16:10-13, with time as the subject, instead of money. With regard to true riches, consider that time is more valuable than money, because time can be enjoyed without money, but money cannot be enjoyed without time. Even if all your other physical resources are exhausted, time continues on. Whether you are a follower of Christ, or you are a non-believer, we all have at least one thing in common -- we are all given a limited amount of time. If you are a follower of Christ, you believe that God has called you to serve him -- so is the way you are spending your time consistent with that belief? Time is a precious gift, yet it is wasted on many empty pursuits; and if you waste something, it shows a disregard for the value of the thing you are wasting. So if we have not proven faithful in using the little time we have been given, why would God entrust us with eternity?

At baptism we enter into a covenant with God and pledge to become slaves to Christ. (1 Cor. 7:22 and Romans 6:12) As he laid down his life for us, we also figuratively agreed to lay down our lives, subjecting our will to his, in the hopes that we might one day be called Sons of God. (John 15:13-14 and John 8:35) As his slaves, we are his property, and in truth, all things belong to God. So if we are not found faithful in dealing with His property in this life, how can we be entrusted to care for the eternal mansion he has prepared for his children? (John 14:2) If we will not willingly serve as slaves now, how will we inherit as sons? We cannot serve two masters. We either hate having to obey God and love exercising our free will, choosing to use our time as we please, or we are devoted to God and hate our carnal nature, which hinders us from knowing him more fully. We cannot serve God when we are more concerned with the cares of this life than we are with the interests of His Kingdom, or when we value physical blessings to be enjoyed in the present above spiritual rewards obtained in the future.

We are told to confess our sins to each other and to pray for each other (James 5:16), and so in conclusion I would like to acknowledge that when I examine my life in light of the Scriptures we've discussed, I have not consistently used my time in the ways that I ought to have. But there comes a time when anyone who desires to truly become like Christ must cease living for themselves, and I believe that time is now, so I want to live differently. I want the way I use my time to truly reflect my love for God. I want my life to have meaning and purpose. I want the spiritual gifts Paul discussed because I realize I cannot adequately serve God without them. I want the eternal rewards God promises to those who faithfully serve Him. But just as a cat cannot will itself to become a lion, I cannot be more than I am, unless God changes me. My responsibility, then, is to

maintain the desire to be more, for the sake of glorifying and honoring his name, and to continue to look to Him, trust in Him, and allow Him to complete His work in me. I shared this message today in the hope that each of you would be inspired with the same desire, and because I wanted to show that when the spirit and power of God is not at work in us, it is an indication of the weakness of our love for Him. Unless a person is willing to confront that truth, the door to change will not open.

Remember that Jesus once observed:

"The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

Many are called to work in the Lord's fields, but few are chosen, because few are willing to put in the work it requires. It is far easier to be concerned with tilling our own field. May we therefore be ever mindful that how we approach the work we have been given to do reflects the value we place on the reward we expect to receive; and may God continuously work in each of us both to will and to do his good pleasure.