

Use Your Gifts

How to Identify Your Gifts and Use Them in Love for God and Others



A **Next Steps** Resource of Mercy Hill Church

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Love for God and Others

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Much of the content of this booklet has been adapted from two sermons delivered by Nick Weber at Mercy Hill Church entitled "Use Your Gifts (Parts 1 and 2)." If you prefer listening to reading, you can find these sermons online at mercyhillchurch.org.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1 Corinthians 12:4-7

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The Critical Path

Step by Step by Step

Over my years in pastoral ministry, I've come to identify certain key steps along the pathway of discipleship to Jesus that I want always to keep before us as a church. We call them "Next Steps" (fancy, I know). And there are nine of them. They take you from skepticism and doubt, through faith and community, all the way to outreach and service.¹

In that sense, then, when you look at these Next Steps closely, you realize they correspond quite nicely with our three core values as a church: Faith, Community, and Mission. There's a moving *upward* (Faith), a moving *inward* (Community), and a moving *outward* (Mission). The Next Steps follow right along that trajectory, with each of these core values having three steps associated with it.

Now, before we really dive into the subject at hand—this seventh step of "using your gifts"—I wanted to begin by quickly showing you the connection between this step and the ones that have come before it.

A Move Away from Selfishness

I think many Christians, sadly, are prone to think that the church exists simply to serve them. We can approach it almost like people rolling into a gas station. We come in to get "filled up" before the start of another hard week. And then, at the end of the week, when our tank is on empty, we come back for more.

Please don't misunderstand me on this: the church is here to serve. We do hope that you are blessed and encouraged by your time with us. But, if we're not careful, we can slowly start to see the church more through the lens of the marketplace or the entertainment industry—where we're the consumer, the client, the audience. And that's a problem.

¹ See the back cover of this booklet for an overview diagram of these nine steps.

God has something much different, much better, in mind for us. And we see this clearly, I think, as we follow along the Next Steps pathway. To help you, allow me to briefly summarize a few of them for us now:

- The first step is *Consider Jesus*. Here is where we are encouraged to bring our questions and our doubts and give ourselves to investigating this man from Nazareth. Who is he? What has he said? What has he done? What do I make of it all? This is the step, really, for those who are outside of Christianity looking in, wondering what it's all about.
- But then the second step is *Be Baptized*. Here is where we come to repent and trust Jesus. And we want to "go public" with our new faith and submit ourselves to baptism as Christ has called us to. Baptism is this tangible picture of our association with Jesus in his death and resurrection. We go down. We come up. We live in him.
- Then the third step is *Walk the Sacred Path*. Here is where we learn to be alone with Jesus. We cultivate our devotional lives. We grow more comfortable with reading our Bibles and praying. We enjoy communion with God.

Now pause. You may have already noticed, but these first three steps are the ones that really move us along with our first core value of Faith. As we transition to consider the next three steps, we find, no surprise, that we're now starting down the road towards our second core value of Community.

- So the fourth step is *Become a Member*. Here, of course, is where we give ourselves to this local church with a sense of covenantal commitment. You don't do the Christian life alone (as if such a thing were even possible). You press in and engage it as a vital member of Christ's larger body.
- And then, in the fifth place, we have *Join a Home Group*. With this we are pressing in even further towards other believers and doing life together. We're not just showing up on Sundays and

slipping out the back door. We're meaningfully involved with the saints through the week.

- But then, as a sixth step, and at the deepest level so far as Community is concerned, we have *Pursue Discipleship*. At this point we encourage you to get involved in what we call "DNA Groups." Here is where we're really getting into the finer details of walking with Jesus, and we're doing it with a few other guys or gals in an intentional way.

But now, again, hit pause for a moment. If we were to stop our critical path of discipleship here, you realize that, in some sense, you could still be nurturing that "marketplace mentality" we referenced earlier. Everything to this point could still be seen through that self-oriented lens: "It's all about *me*—Faith and Community. God saves *me*. God speaks to *me*. God fills up *me*. God puts *me* in community, where *I* am known and loved, where *I* have friends and family in Jesus. This is nice. I could get used to this."

*He brings us to himself and plugs us into
community, not so we can finally lounge
around in luxury and self-indulgence,
but so we can serve . . . like he did.*

So now, and this is the essential point, if we were to stop here, we really would miss the full range of motion Jesus is trying to work out in us—the full trajectory he wants us on. You see, he brings us to himself and plugs us into community, not so we can finally lounge around in luxury and self-indulgence, but so we can *serve* . . . like he did. Remember, that's the point of regeneration and discipleship in the first place: we're being renewed in and conformed to *his* image. And Jesus, the "Son of Man," as we're told in Mark 10:45, came, ultimately, "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Therefore, he calls us not just towards Faith and Community, but also towards Mission. To put a sharper point on it, so far as this little booklet is concerned: he wants you to *use your gifts* for the building up of others.

Ironic Satisfaction

Now, before we go any further, let me make something plain. As we follow behind Jesus and move from selfishness towards service and self-sacrifice, we begin to experience what I call an “ironic satisfaction.” By the term, I simply mean: one of the ways you and I get *filled up* as disciples of Jesus is actually (ironically!) by *pouring out*.

When we allow ourselves to hoard all the blessing that flows to us from God and the church it will stagnate and sour in our souls. But when we remove the log-jams and break down the dams of our selfishness, the water flows free and remains fresh and vital . . . and deeply satisfying.

One of my favorite texts for this is Isaiah 58:10-11, where God says through the prophet:

[I]f you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the LORD will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

Do you see it? There’s the ironic satisfaction I’m talking about. How do you become like a “watered garden” (v. 11)? By keeping all the water for yourself? No! By watering others—by “pour[ing] yourself out for the hungry and satisfy[ing] the desire of the afflicted” (v. 10). Do you want waters that will not fail to satisfy you? Then let those waters flow from you to satisfy others. As you water, you will be watered. That’s how it works.

This is why Jesus himself would say in John 4:34: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.” I wonder if you remember the context for this statement? He was out in the heat of the

day, sometime after noon. He had been traveling and was “wearied . . . from his journey” (v. 6). But instead of caring for himself in these moments, he set his heart’s concern upon another: a Samaritan woman, weighed down under the burden of her own guilt and shame. He spoke kindly to her. He listened to her. He loved her. He poured himself out for her, connecting her ultimately to what he called the “living water” of God (v. 10). He brought satisfaction to her in the deepest and driest places.

And then, suddenly, into the intimacy of this moment break the disciples. They’d been away getting food (v. 8). And, upon their return, they see Jesus here with this woman. And they ask him, somewhat confused, even a little irritated: “Jesus, aren’t you hungry?” As we read in verse 31: “[T]he disciples were urging him, saying, ‘Rabbi, eat.’”

And it’s to this urging of his disciples that Jesus responds with the words already quoted. He says to them in essence: “Eat? Why would I eat? I’m already full! I’m doing God’s work. I’m filling others . . . and that fills me.”

As you water, you will be watered.

God Has Something for You to Do

All this to say: when God saves you and brings you into community in the church, he has something for you to do. He has a purpose for you to engage, a ministry for you to fulfill. He wants you to use, to steward, your gifts for his glory and the good of others.

And, with this little booklet, my hope is I can help us along with this. What are your gifts? What can you do? Where should you start?

So far as using our gifts is concerned, in the pages that follow I want to first lay the foundation for us by drawing out *six essential truths* from 1 Corinthians 12 in particular. And then I want to consider our place in it all. We’ll get personal and try to figure out how we might go about identifying where we are gifted in particular and how God might be

calling us to use those gifts in our own unique way. For this I'll outline *six essential "looks"* we can take to get some clarity on the matter.

I hope, by the time we're done here, that you not only sense the great importance of using your gifts to serve others, but you also have a sense of clarity as to what that might look like for you practically. Ready? Let's go!



Sometimes we can approach the church with a "marketplace mentality"—where we're the consumer, the client, the audience. How have you seen this play out in other churches around our city? How have you seen this play out in your own heart? Why do you think we're prone to approach the church this way?

Though we're prone to such things, God has something else for us, something much better. He wants us to approach the church not just looking to get, but looking to give. In Isaiah 58:10-11 we see that, surprisingly, God's people are actually filled up themselves by pouring out for others. Do you really believe this is true? In what ways have you personally experienced this "ironic satisfaction"? Tell the story.

Do you have a sense of what your own "spiritual gift(s)" might be or is this a somewhat new (and confusing!) concept for you? If you had to identify something up front here, what would you say your gift(s) is? (Obviously, I hope the rest of this booklet will help bring even more clarity to this for you!)

Laying the Foundation: Six Essential Truths

As we look to lay the foundation here, we need first to go to God in his Word and see what he has to say on the subject of gifts and the like. For this, there is perhaps no better place to turn than 1 Corinthians 12. I've included the whole chapter here for you to read. Do so slowly, thoughtfully, prayerfully. And then we'll proceed!

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the

ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Alright! All I want to do now is make my way through these verses, and I'll draw out our six truths as we go. You might see these truths as something akin to stones we're laying in the foundation underneath this idea of using our gifts.

Truth #1: We Are Humbled (vv. 1-3)

Look at verses 1-3 for just a moment. There's something here I felt simply couldn't be passed over. It strikes me that before Paul really gets

into this whole discussion concerning spiritual gifts and the body of Christ and all this, he first draws our attention to the fact that the Spirit leads us to say “Jesus is Lord”: “and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (v. 3).

Now, there is a whole host of reasons Paul could have decided to bring this out first. But I think, perhaps, one of the more compelling reasons is that he wanted to make sure we’d all been set in our proper place under the lordship of Christ from the outset.

To put it another way: I think Paul is making the point here that until we are humbled and broken beneath King Jesus, we can never really be of any use to him, or anyone else for that matter.

This, of course, has been a huge problem with these Corinthians, as noted elsewhere in the epistle. If you’ve ever read 1 Corinthians, I’m sure you couldn’t escape noticing this fact. They’re proud. They’re competing. They’re talking about who is better than the other and coming up with all sorts of metrics for determining such a thing—anything from which leader in the church baptized you to which spiritual gift you have. And because there’s this pride, it’s all wrong.

So Paul opens with a fresh reminder that before the Holy Spirit can really make use of us, so far as these gifts are concerned, he has to first humble us to the point where we can say: “*Jesus is Lord . . . not me.*” We can’t even begin to use our spiritual gifts until we’re broken of our self-rule. We are of little use to the kingdom so long as we think we are of great use. It is only when we have given up on our own strength and purpose that we can at last be reinvigorated with his.

He can start using us because we stop fighting back.

The image in my mind is that of a wild horse. If you’ve ever seen a good western, then you know: before a wild stallion can ever be of any use to the cowboy, he’s got to break it first. The thing won’t take bit and bridle until it’s broken. Until it’s humbled.

And so it is with us and spiritual gifts. The first stone to lay in the foundation is that of humility. The cross of Christ crushes us so that power of Christ can be manifested in us. “*Jesus is Lord.*” That’s where it starts.

Before we press on, let me just encourage you with something from this. It seems to me we tend to think that, when we are broken, when we

are humbled, it's the end of things. We tried to do it, and we failed. We think that God is setting us on the bench. That's why things aren't working. He's done with us.

We can't even begin to use our spiritual gifts until we're broken of our self-rule. The cross of Christ crushes us so that power of Christ can be manifested in us.

But, if I'm reading Paul rightly here, I think the opposite is actually the case. Truly, when God breaks you, when God humbles you—when things go wrong and you feel unsuccessful, like a loser—he's not taking you out of the game, he's actually getting ready to finally put you in! What you thought was the end turns out to be just the beginning.

So take heart: God may be humbling you, but he's most assuredly not done with you!

Truth #2: We Are Gifted (vv. 4-13)

Making a Few Observations

Now I want to consider the fact that we are not just humbled in Christ, we're also gifted. For this, look first with me again at verses 4-7:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Concerning spiritual gifts as they're described here, let me make a few observations. First, note that these gifts are sourced and

empowered by our trinitarian God. The whole Trinity is involved in this. We see the "Spirit" (v. 4), the "Lord" (referring to Jesus) (v. 5), and "God" (the Father) (v. 6). And they're the ones who distribute these gifts to us and energize them within us.

The second thing we must see is that every Christian has a gift—at least one, maybe many. This is what comes out there in verses 6-7. God empowers these gifts in who?—"in *everyone*" (v. 6).² And then verse 7: "[t]o *each* is given the manifestation of the Spirit" In other words: God doesn't pick favorites here. *Everyone, each* of us, is given a gift in the Spirit. If you have the Spirit of Christ, you have a gift from Christ. More on that later.

*If you have the Spirit of Christ,
you have a gift from Christ.*

But now, thirdly, this is not to say we're all just uniform and monochromatic, right? Though we all are given gifts, we're not all given the same gifts. There's unity but diversity (not unlike the Trinity from whom these gifts come in the first place!). So we see in these verses an emphasis on variety. "[T]here are *varieties* of gifts . . ." (v. 4). "[T]here are *varieties* of service . . ." (v. 5). "[T]here are *varieties* of activities . . ." (v. 6).

This third observation is what is really elaborated on further in verses 8-11. Let's look at those verses now:

For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All

² Any emphasis in Scripture citations has been added by the author.

these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

I love how it ends there. You don't get the whole thing. You get a "portion." Did you catch that? The Spirit "apportions" these gifts to us. It's the Greek word *diaireō* which means to distribute or divide. It's the same word used in the Parable of the Prodigal Son to talk about how the father "divided his property between" his two sons (Luke 15:12). You don't get it all. You get a portion.

Broadly Classifying the Various Gifts

It is beyond the scope of this booklet to try to make sense of each of these individual gifts Paul lists out here. If you'll permit it, I shall instead attempt to take up the matter a bit more broadly.

And, you know, in one sense I do think that it is perfectly appropriate to do so. After all, the Bible on the whole really does seem to be somewhat broad and imprecise when dealing with the subject of spiritual gifts. For example, there are other places where gifts are listed out in the New Testament (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:8-10, 28-30; 14:26; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 4:10-11; cf. 1 Cor. 7:7) and, interestingly, each of these lists records a different set of gifts! Even the list here in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 is different than the list Paul gives later in verses 28-30 of this same chapter.

So clearly, then, there is not one master list of these gifts for us all to reference. It's inexact. It's a bit open-ended. And the implication in all of this, therefore, is that no one list is meant to be *exhaustive* but only *illustrative* of the kinds of gifts a Christian can be given by God. And so, rather than try to nail them down and define each with utter precision, I'd prefer, for my part, to paint with a bit broader strokes.

In the broadest sense, I think we can divide these gifts up into two categories: *word* gifts (e.g. prophecy, teaching, tongues, etc.) and *deed* gifts (e.g. healing, helping, administering, etc.). This is essentially the classification put forward by Peter in his "list" (if we could call it that) in 1 Peter 4:10-11:

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever *speaks*, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever *serves*, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

There are speaking gifts and there are serving gifts. There are word gifts and there are deed gifts. That's the broadest classification we can make.

But now—while still remaining somewhat broad, though dialing it in just a touch more—there is yet another way of classifying these gifts that I have found supremely helpful, and I think you might too.

Before I go any further though, as a way of setting us up for understanding, let me remind you of the fact that, with all of these gifts, we are ultimately just receiving manifestations of Jesus' own ministry and power. That's why, as Peter says, it is God who is getting the glory through Christ with this. He's the one being shown in us. He's the one being seen when we use our gifts.

Paul goes further into this idea by talking about the church, not just as Jesus' *people*, but as his *body*. Jesus may already be ascended and seated at the right hand of the Father, but, when he pours out his Spirit, he distributes to us aspects of himself, we could say, so that now we, as individual members of his body, when we come together, we show each other and the world a fuller picture of who Christ is. So Paul goes on in 1 Corinthians 12:12 and writes: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." He puts it even more plainly down in verse 27, which we'll consider a bit more later: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

And here's where I'm going with this: because these gifts are distributed to us as members of Christ's body, empowering us for ministry, so that he would be shown and seen more clearly in the world, it makes sense, then, that they can be organized according to the three main offices that Christ himself holds so far as his own ministry is concerned.

Here I'm thinking of what theologians have referred to as the "tripartite office" of Christ. He is *Prophet*, he is *Priest*, and he is *King*.

- By this schema, then, **prophetic gifts** are those that put an emphasis on speaking and communicating God's word with power. There's a particular concern for truth. These gifts equip the person to bring *Christ's wisdom* to others. So this would include gifts of prophesy, teaching, evangelism, words of wisdom or knowledge, etc.
- **Priestly gifts** are those that put an emphasis on service and showing compassion. There's a particular concern for love. These gifts equip the person to bring *Christ's care* to others. So this would include gifts of healing, helping, serving, acts of mercy, etc.
- **Kingly gifts** are those that put an emphasis on ruling and establishing organization and structure. There's a particular concern for order. These gifts equip the person to bring *Christ's rule* to others. So this would include gifts of leading, administrating, contributing, etc.

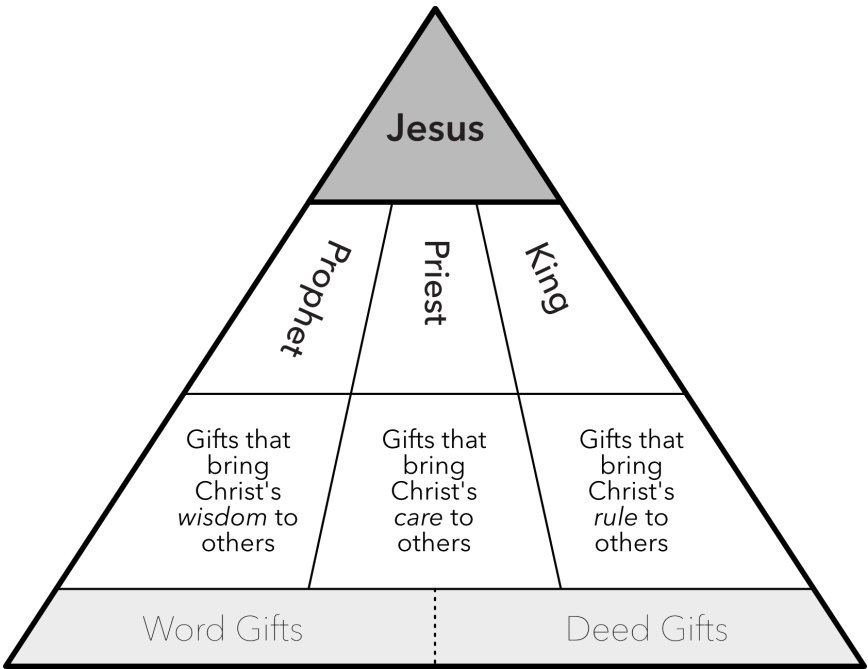
Prophetic gifts . . . bring Christ's wisdom.

Priestly gifts . . . bring Christ's care.

Kingly gifts . . . bring Christ's rule.

I suppose, if you consider all this carefully, you can even see how that first word and deed classification can be lain overtop this prophet-priest-king classification quite nicely. Prophetic gifts place the accent more on word, kingly gifts place the accent more on deed, and priestly gifts are somewhere in the middle with a balanced mixture of both (see

the following diagram for a pictorial representation of all we've said thus far).³



Where Do You Fit?

So I wonder: where do you think you fit in with all this? We'll obviously continue to discuss the matter as we go, but stop with me and consider it for a moment.

If I had to put myself in the matrix there, and rank the options from one to three, I'd say my gifts trend probably first towards prophet, then to king, then to priest. I tend to maximize truth and talking and proclaiming God's Word. I also tend to like organization and process and structure. And I've found that, while I absolutely love people and caring for folks, that is the part of my ministry it seems I've had to put in the most work to grow. It hasn't come quite as naturally to me. If I'm not careful,

³ For more on this, see Vern Poythress, *What Are Spiritual Gifts?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 14ff.

I can let my leanings towards the prophetic or kingly sway me off course. I'm tempted to maximize truth and clobber people with it (the prophetic temptation). I'm tempted to focus on projects over people rather than people over projects (the kingly temptation).

This is why, by the way, when I went to seminary, knowing this about myself, I actually didn't even take a preaching course. To that point, I'd already been preaching weekly for about five years. I was somewhat familiar with the task. I felt like it was more in my lane. But, on the other hand, I had a sense that I was weak in the priestly stuff—things like counseling and one-on-one care. People could be inspired by my preaching ministry, but I struggled to then sit across the table from them and really help them take that truth into the details of their own life in a gentle and winsome way. So I decided, instead of preaching courses, I needed to take biblical counseling courses. I wanted to grow in this. It's where I'm weakest, I would say.

So prophet (first) - king (second) - priest (third). That's my best guess for myself. I wonder where you think you'd fit?

Truth #3: We Are Needed (vv. 14-20)

But now we keep moving on in 1 Corinthians 12 and we come to verses 14-20. And here we see that Paul begins to really press in on this body analogy—where we're all conceived of as individual members of a body, playing different parts. And he uses this image to get at two critical truths in particular. The first is this: we are *needed*.

This is a word of encouragement for those who might be given over to spiritual despair—feeling like they're worthless, like they have nothing to offer. Listen again to what he says:

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell?

But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

Do you hear the main objection from the members, or the body parts, there? "Because I am not a _____, I do not belong to the body." There's this sense that I don't belong here. We look at the other (what we consider) more "presentable" parts of the body and think: "Ah, that's critical; they're needed; they belong. But would anyone even notice if I was gone? I don't think so."

Listen, some of us are just stuck in our shame. Sometimes we're broken and beat up, black and blue, because others have been hitting us with their words and their opinions and their thoughts. But other times it's not because of what's happening out there—I'm actually hitting myself. "How could I have said that? How could I have done that? How could I be this way? It's over for me. I don't belong here. Put me on the bench. I'm cutting myself from the team."

But, with all respect, Paul is saying here: you can't always trust what you're feeling on this. It doesn't matter how worthless you think you are. The truth is: you are needed. Jesus didn't rise up from the grave so you could sit on the sideline feeling sorry for yourself. He rose up so you could get in the game. That's the point.

So when we relegate ourselves to mere benchwarmers—muttering on about our unworthiness and utter insufficiency—we need to realize: we are not just arguing with the apostle Paul on this . . . we're arguing with God himself. Does God know what's in you? Of course. Does he know you're not worthy in and of yourself, that you are a broken sinner, that you have made a mess of things? Of course. That's no surprise. But that's also no obstacle. Because his grace just barrels through these barriers.

If you need proof on this, consider the wholly incompetent losers Jesus makes into his own apostles. Peter—the self-confident coward. Paul—the self-righteous murderer? Are you kidding? But that's the point! It's not about you. It's about him. And if he says you are needed for his body, the church, to function properly, then that's how it is!

Maybe your dad told you that you were good for nothing. Maybe your mom used to make you feel stupid, the way she would talk to you. Maybe your husband or your wife has you thinking you are worthless and you just better do what you're told. Maybe the church has hurt you and all but convinced you that you're unwelcome and that God could never use a person like you. Maybe you're just saying this stuff to yourself on repeat. It's probably some mixed up mess of all of this.

But listen to me carefully: this is not what God is saying.

You're not the one saint God forgot to gift.

He is gently, but firmly—and certainly lovingly—getting in the face of your spiritual despair in these moments and saying: “You are needed. You're not the one saint I forgot to gift. You've got something to use. So, by grace through faith, get up and use it!”

Truth #4: We Are Needy (vv. 21-26)

Interestingly, the second critical truth Paul draws out from this analogy of the church as the body of Christ comes at things from the opposite side. Now he wants us to see: not only are we all needed, but we're also all *needy*.

This, then, pushes against the other error we can be prone to as Christians. Here it's not so much the error of spiritual despair but of spiritual pride. There's this feeling of prominence—in a self-exalting, self-congratulating sort of way. Simply put, because of your gifts you think you're better than others in the church.

So we come to verses 21-26 now and we read:

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the

greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

So where the other members of the body were saying, "Because I'm not this or that, I don't belong," these members of the body are saying, "Because I *am* this or that, I have no need of others. I've got it all right here. I am God's gift to the church. Let the crowds part. Here I come!"

To put an illustration on this: some people approach the church body like those guys in the gym who seem to think every day is biceps day. For some reason, from a man's perspective, we've come to think that ladies don't care so much about big calves, at least not to the same degree they care about big biceps (it turns out they don't seem to care all that much either way!). Therefore, in light of this profound insight, so far as the gym is concerned: every day is biceps day.

And so it goes quite well for a while. The dudes get "swole," as they say on the streets. But after months, even years, of this, the guys start to look ridiculous. They have these massive tree-branch arms and these tiny twig legs. If, God forbid, you ever did get in a fight with one of them, all you'd really have to do is kick the poor man's shins and his whole beastly frame would just go toppling over.

But here's the point: sometimes we mistakenly approach the church like this. There's only a few parts of the body that we think really matter. And if we're the bicep we walk around the church thinking: "Step aside calves. Let me get to work. Every day is bicep day." That's the stuff people notice—the flashy gifts, the more presentable parts.

But if we give into such nonsense, it's not long before Christ's body gets all disproportional and disfigured. We may have the appearance of strength, but we're fundamentally weak.

You know, in Ephesians 4 Paul talks about this same idea again. He says, in essence, the heavy lifting isn't just for a select few, like the church leaders or something; it's for every member. So he writes: "He gave the

apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, *to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*" (vv. 11-12). In other words: it is only as every member is playing a vital role that the body as a whole is made strong.

Paul goes on to say that this is how we stop being "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (v. 14). Satan can't just come and kick our shins, because every member is involved in this thing. We're strong.

So listen, if you're on the other side of spiritual despair, and you're teetering into spiritual pride, where you're thinking: "I can't stand that person; I don't want that person around; I don't need that person here in the church, they're good for nothing"—just as I warned the previous members, so too now I would warn you: you're not merely arguing with the apostle Paul on this . . . you're arguing with God himself. He says: "Whether you get it or not, whether you want it or not, you need them—if you're going to be healthy, if you're going to see and show Christ rightly."

If I could just be honest: sometimes because I'm often the guy on the stage with the mic, because as the lead pastor I'm what some might consider one of the more "presentable" parts of the church body, I can start think I'm one of the more important pieces here. I can think that I should get in and get my way. I'll fix it. I'll do it myself. Let me handle it. Every day is biceps day. I struggle with that. I need to remember this truth. I am needy.

Think about it. If it's true that I lean more toward prophetic and kingly gifts, as I mentioned earlier, then I need the priestly folks around to help—or I'm going make this place crusty. We'll have truth. We'll have good processes. But what about warmth and service and care for the orphan and widow?

Whether you get it or not, whether you want it or not, you need them—if you're going to be healthy, if you're going to see and show Christ rightly.

Now, I do think I've actually changed and grown quite a bit over the years on this. But I'll tell you the biggest reason why: my wife Megan's gifts run more in the priestly direction. So our gifts rubbed against each other for a while and, finally, I started seeing just how wise she is, how caring, how gentle. I'm truly terrified to think of the leader I would be were it not for my wife. And I mean that. I've needed her to keep me from getting all out of whack. If I didn't have people with other gifts around me, I'd end up making the church in my own image instead of Christ's!

So consider it:

- The prophetic gifts—they need the priestly gifts to soften them and remind them that we speak the truth *with love*. And they need the kingly gifts to help them organize and structure their ministry efforts.
- The priestly gifts—they need the prophetic gifts to help them not just get squishy on truth and buckle to people's emotions in the name of "love." And they need the kingly gifts to help them prioritize and keep them efficient and not just going wherever the needs take them.
- The kingly gifts—they need the prophet gifts to help them keep the processes and things guided not just by efficiency but by God's Word. And they need the priestly gifts to remind them that we develop systems and structure in love for people—that's the point.

We could keep going with this, but I think you get the idea. We are needed . . . and we are needy.

Truth #5: It's All from Grace (v. 27)

The next thing I want to bring out is simply this: it's all from grace. Such a truth is obvious, perhaps, but it can't go unstated. You and I don't belong here. I'm pretty sure Jesus would be more effective without me. Nevertheless, here I am. Why? In a word: *grace*.

Now, of course, there's a number of ways I could show you this. For one thing, all along the way we've been referring to what's been called "spiritual"—what?—"gifts" (cf. 1 Cor. 12:1, 4, 9, 28, 30, 31). That's what Paul calls them. They're gifts. Gifts by definition are those things that we don't deserve. We are freely given them . . . by grace.

But beyond even this, the matter is clear as day in the Greek behind our English translations. These spiritual gifts, do you want to know what the word is in Greek? *Charisma*. You say: "So what. Why does that matter?" Well, do you want to know what the word for grace is in Greek? *Charis*. We get *charisma* by *charis*. You don't have to be an etymologist to see the connection. These are *gifts* of *grace*. That's why Peter just freely switches out one word for the other, as we saw earlier, but you may not have noticed: "As each has received a gift [Gk. *charisma*], use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace [Gk. *charis*] . . ." (1 Pet. 4:10).

But, you know, there is another way I really wanted to drive the matter home for us, and it tags onto this body analogy Paul uses yet again. So Paul says there in 1 Corinthians 12:27: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

What I want you to realize is that this isn't the first time in this letter Paul has brought this idea up. All this discussion about spiritual gifts and the body of Christ with us as the members—everyone knows 1 Corinthians 12 for that. But it's actually all rooted back in stuff he was saying earlier to these Corinthians in chapter 10. And there we see Paul derives this whole image of the church as Jesus' body, with these diversified gifts and things, from the Lord's Supper. That's what stands behind all of this for Paul.

So he writes in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is *one bread*, we who are many are *one body*, for we all partake of the one bread.

The bread, we know, was symbolic of Christ's body broken for us on that cross. And that's what I want you to see. Paul's understanding of the church as this diversely gifted and profoundly united body of Christ grows out of his understanding of the literal body of Christ broken for us on that cross. We share in this diverse and unified body because we share in that broken bread.

It's because of his broken body and our participation in it that we now come together in him as the body united and empowered!

It's almost as if we're given this visual picture here to help us understand: how were these various gifts given to us—bits and pieces of Christ's power and ministry distributed according to his will? Well, it's because Jesus was treated as a rag doll on that cross—his body torn to shreds for us. And, in a way, we could say that we each receive something of him from that. That's the picture. In other words: it's because of his broken body and our participation in it that we now come together in him as the body united and empowered! That's how we got here! This whole thing, it's all from grace!

Bottom line: Christ went to the cross, not just to give us salvation, but to give us spiritual gifts—gifts that he's calling us to use in love for him and for others. And this leads us to the sixth and final truth I want to consider with you . . .

Truth #6: It's All for Love (v. 31)

It's all from grace and it's all for love—love for God, and love for others.

Spiritual gifts, they're not about you. They're not given so that you can put on a parade to garner your own applause and glory. Whatever gifts you have—they're *from him* and they're *for love*.

This is why 1 Corinthians 12 ends the way that it does there in verse 31: "[E]arnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still *more excellent way*." There's a bit of intrigue here, isn't there? Something's left hanging in the air, unresolved. And we're wondering what's coming next? "[A] still more excellent way"?! He's saying, in essence: "Spiritual gifts are great and all; but there's something even more important that I want to tell you about now."

"What is it?" you ask.

Well, what comes after 1 Corinthians 12? 1 Corinthians 13, of course—a well-known and much-appreciated portion of Scripture, often referred to as "the love chapter." You've likely heard it quoted in one way or another at almost every wedding you've ever attended:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. (vv. 4-8)

So the minister or someone else in the bridal party reads these words into the mic. The bride and groom are gazing intently into each other's eyes. Tears gather and stream. And all in attendance feel their hearts flutter with something light and warm. "This is love. Isn't it wonderful!"

Certainly love is a wonderful thing. And, no doubt, these words of Paul apply to marriage and the love that spouses should have for one another. But, when we extract the verses like this, inevitably we miss their larger context. And what is the larger context? It's this discussion of spiritual gifts!

Chapters 12 and 14 of 1 Corinthians both singularly concern themselves with the matter of spiritual gifts. And then, suddenly, here in the middle of that discussion, Paul seems to hit pause, as it were, to talk about love. But he's not hitting pause, is he?! No. He thrusts into the center of this discussion that which is truly the center of the issue. Do you know what I mean?

Even the way Paul has structured these chapters makes plain his main point. Love is the center around which all these spiritual gifts are meant to turn. It's the sun around which these planets are to orbit. If you don't have love at the center—as the reason and driving force for the use of your gifts—then you've missed it. And everything will fall out of order, out of line, out of orbit.

That's why Paul begins 1 Corinthians 13 the way that he does:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (vv. 1-3)

Here Paul is jealous that we see with noonday clarity that the *gifts of the Spirit* must be subordinated to the *fruit of the Spirit*—the essence of which is love (cf. Gal. 5:22-23). In other words: it's all for love or it's all for nothing! Who cares about your skills and your accomplishments and your resume if it's all done with concern only for yourself and no one else. Who cares?! You're wasting it. You're missing it.

You're in danger of succumbing to the same error committed by those in Matthew 7 of whom Jesus says:

On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." (vv. 22-23)

"You had the gifts but not the fruit. You had the competency but not character. You had the hand but not the heart. You had the works but not the relationship . . . and the love." The fruit of the Spirit trumps the gifts of the Spirit every time. We must never get this backwards!

*The gifts of the Spirit must be subordinated
to the fruit of the Spirit. In other words: it's all
for love or it's all for nothing!*

As we might expect, even before 1 Corinthians 13, Paul has already been hinting at this very same point. So he writes in 1 Corinthians 12:7: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good*."

But then, after the charged rhetoric of 1 Corinthians 13, when we come to chapter 14, Paul is no longer merely hinting at his point, he's hollering about it at loudest volume. It seems his mission now to make this gift-love nexus unmistakably plain to us. The whole chapter is given over to it.

So he opens: "*Pursue love*, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts . . ." (1 Cor. 14:1). And he goes on to flesh out what this means. If our use of gifts is truly harnessed and directed by love, we will use them in such a way that others will be "*built up*" (vv. 3, 4, 5, 12, 17, 26); "*encouraged*" (vv. 3, 31); "*consoled*" (v. 3); "*benefited*" (v. 6); and "*instructed*" (v. 19).

Two of the clearest statements to this end come in verses 12 and 26: "So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, *strive to excel in building up the church*" (v. 12). "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. *Let all things be done for building up*" (v. 26).

It makes sense, doesn't it? This is how Jesus operated. This is what his earthly ministry was all about—love for his Father and his neighbor. He marshalled all of his strength, all of his resources, all of his gifts, and used them to serve and bless you and me.

So we then ought to do the same!

Which of the six truths mentioned in this section stood out to you most and why?

Considering that threefold classification of spiritual gifts (*prophetic, priestly, kingly*), how do you think your gifts trend? Which are you strongest in? Which are you weakest in? If you had to rank them one through three, how would you? Why? What does such an exercise teach you about yourself and your place in the church do you think?

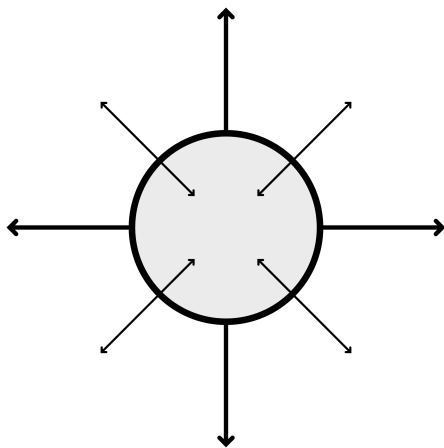


Which error are you more prone to: *spiritual despair* ("Because I'm not a _____, I don't belong in the body") or *spiritual pride* ("Because I am a _____, I don't need the body"). Why do you think? How does Paul's image of the church as a body help you combat these errors?

If you had to answer (without worry of sounding proud), where would you say your gifts are most *needed* at Mercy Hill? On the other hand, where do you feel you are personally most *needy*? What gifts do you lack? What do you need from others to "balance" you out?

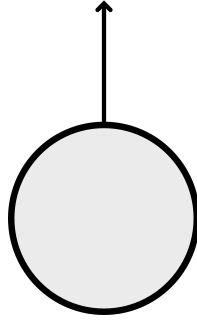
Finding Your Place: Six Essential Looks

So we've identified these six essential truths that must undergird and inform the way we go about using our gifts. Now, at last, we're ready to get more practical and personal. It's time we try to discern our own place in all of this—what are *my* gifts and how should *I* use them? For this, as I mentioned at the start, I have now, not six essential truths, but six essential "*looks*"—six places you and I can look to gain more clarity for ourselves on the matter. We need to look *up*, look *down*, look *in*, look *out*, look *backward*, and look *forward*. Let's consider these one by one.



Look #1: Look Up

With this first look I'm simply referring to the idea of prayer. Prayer, in this sense, is looking up to *God*.



It shouldn't come as a surprise to us that this is really the starting point for discerning our own gifts and the manner in which we can best use them. After all, these gifts have come to us *from God* in the first place. As we read in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same *Spirit*; and there are varieties of service, but the same *Lord*; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same *God* who empowers them all in everyone."

This is his doing. Therefore, he's really the first place we should look to find guidance with it all. God is the one who has made us, redeemed us, and gifted us. It only follows, then, that he's also the one who to whom we should look to direct us. He's our Commander in Chief. So we look up. We pray.

It really is an astounding thing to consider that the God of the heavens and earth should have some purpose and plan for my little life. It would be like me taking concern for what one little ant is up to in my backyard later this afternoon. Truth be told, I don't care about that ant. I don't even really want him there. He's a nuisance. I've got much more important things to concern myself with.

And I do think many Christians might feel this way about themselves as they stand in relationship with God. They imagine that they are too small, too insignificant, for him to attend to. "He may have plans to use some of the real bigshot Christians, but not me."

The back blurb of Francis Schaeffer's book *No Little People* tells the story, I think: "Most Christians take an honest look at themselves and conclude that their limited talents, energy, and knowledge mean that they don't amount to much. [But] Francis A. Schaeffer says that the

biblical emphasis is quite different. *With God there are no little people!*"⁴ What a thought! It at once humbles and lifts us. You matter. And you're here on purpose. Indeed, you're here *with* a purpose . . . from him.

So of Jeremiah, God says: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5). And of Paul, Jesus says: "[H]e is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15).

But you object at this point: "Nick, do you see what you've just done? Here you are again accenting the fact that God has something for the bigshots to do—the spiritual rockstars like the prophet Jeremiah and the apostle Paul. But this doesn't apply to me."

Well, with all due respect, I'm not finished. I'm still building towards the crescendo. You see, in Ephesians 2, Paul takes this principle—that God sets people apart for good works—and he democratizes it, he broadens the scope of it, until every Christian is encompassed within! Speaking to the Ephesian church in particular, but to all Christians in general, he writes:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* (vv. 8-10)

The Greek word translated "workmanship" here is *poiēma*, from which (I think you can tell) we actually derive the English word "poem." It's very picturesque, isn't it?! In Christ, you are God's poem. He is writing verse and stanza, carefully choosing every word, fitting it all together. And what's the whole thrust of this poem he's writing in your life? "[G]ood works . . . that we should walk in them" (v. 10).

⁴ Francis Schaeffer, *No Little People* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); emphasis added.

This is why I say it all begins with looking up. “God, what is this poem? God, what are these works? You told Jeremiah. You told Paul. Will you talk to me about it? Will you help me find my place in it all?”

All throughout the Gospels we see that Jesus is praying and moving as God leads him. All throughout the book of Acts we see that the early Christians are praying and moving as God leads them. And it should be the same for us. If you want to begin to discern your own gifts and how God might want you to use them, begin with prayer. Look up!

In Christ, you are God’s poem.

In my own story, this has been critical. I remember back when I was first considering dropping out of the landscape architecture program at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo to pursue vocational ministry in some way. I was really wrestling with it, praying about it. I’d already put three years into the program and made it through the hardest part of it all. So I was seeking God. And there were many times where he just graciously directed me.

I’ll give you a couple examples. This first one was quite odd. One of my professors—a great guy, though certainly not a Christian by any stretch—called me into his office after the Thanksgiving break and he said something along these lines: “I don’t know why, but I kept thinking about you all break long. And the thing I kept wondering was: why isn’t he doing what he loves? I can tell you’re passionate about Jesus and the church. Why aren’t you doing that?” I was floored. This was the very issue I was wrestling with and had been praying about.

I remember another time where I was still struggling with the idea. It’s a big decision. I was asking God for some sign that would help me continue to discern. And, the next day, a student from the Cru ministry I was a part of comes up to me and says: “Hey, I was there when you gave that announcement on the purity conference your Bible study is putting on. What you shared was powerful. And I was just curious: have you ever thought about going into full-time ministry?” Again, I was

floored. God was answering my prayers. He was helping me discern my place. He was identifying for me the gifts he had given me to use in love for him and others.

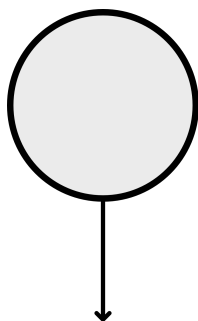
Listen, if you have an open heart and you're surrendered to him and truly seeking his guidance, he'll show you. I really believe that. So look up!



Set aside time for prayer (and fasting?!). Ask God to reveal to you what your gifts are and how he might want you to use them. If you had to identify what you think he's saying to you in this, what would it be? Where has he gifted you? Where is he calling you? Explain.

Look #2: Look Down

I know it might sound strange, but go ahead and do this literally: take a moment, if you would, and look down. What you see? My guess is you see your feet on the floor, right?



Now, what's the point of this silly little exercise? Well, I want you to realize that God has put your feet in this place on purpose. You are not here by accident. You are here for a reason. And, by "here," I don't just

mean: here on this earth in general. I mean: here in this place in particular—not just the earth, but the United States of America; and not just the United States of America, but California; and not just California, but San Jose⁵; and not just San Jose, but at your particular address in your particular space at this particular moment. Again, God has put your feet in this place on purpose.

So with this idea of looking down I'm simply trying to bring to your attention the reality of God's providence. I want to awaken you to the fact that all around you right now there are pressing needs, open doors, opportunities to love and serve and use your gifts. And I'm not just talking about in our church. I'm talking about all around you—in your neighborhood, in your workplace, in this city. Everywhere you walk, if you're eyes are open, you'll see that opportunities abound. There are so many things you could do to help.

*God has put your feet in this place
on purpose.*

You know, sometimes, especially when we're thinking about our gifts or our calling and where God wants us, we get so caught up in looking off to the future—looking over there, somewhere beyond the fence, as it were—that we miss what's right in front of us . . . or right beneath us. God may be calling you to go somewhere else someday, that is true. But, at this point at least, he's called you right here, right now. And what I've found is that, usually, the way you get to wherever you're supposed to be later is by going all in and being faithful wherever you are right now.

I still remember, years ago now, reading this helpful little collection of blog posts by C.J. Mahaney on the subject of biblical productivity.⁶ In it, he starts talking about roles and goals and calling and things like this.

⁵ Or Sunnyvale, or Mountain View, or Saratoga, or Los Gatos, etc. You get the idea!

⁶ <http://www.cjmahaney.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Biblical-Productivity.pdf>

And he encourages those who are trying to figure this stuff out to begin with two simple questions:

- First, “where has God placed me?”
- And, second, “where am I positioned to serve others?”

These two questions cut through a lot of the mystery and the excuses, don’t they? We’re often so confused wondering what our place is and what should we be doing. And sometimes we even use that as an excuse to do nothing. But here Mahaney encourages us to start with this: where are you right now; and what are the needs?

In other words: look down. God has put you in this place on purpose. Go, love, and serve.

At this point, I thought of that line that often gets cited from the book of Esther. You remember, the Jews there in Persia were imperiled at the time and Esther, having favor with the king of Persia, was uniquely positioned to help. So Mordecai, trying to encourage her to action, famously says: “[W]ho knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14). In other words: you’re here at this time in this place on purpose. Step towards the needs of the moment.

There’s an article written by the late David Powlison entitled “What Is Your Calling?” that I found to be supremely helpful. I’ll quote from it again before we’re done. But listen to him here. What he says fits within the contours of our current discussion about looking down:

Your calling is not simply individualistic self-fulfillment, a version of “follow your dreams.” It is keyed to the true needs of the people around you, and God’s purposes for his people. What are the problems, troubles, and struggles of your time and place? In your family and home? Local church? Work place? Neighborhood or city? Nation? World? Wider body of Christ? The sons of Issachar were “men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do” (1 Chron. 12:32). What are your times? What needs to be done? Abigail had “good understanding” (1 Sam. 25:3, 33), and figured out what she needed to do to defuse a volatile situation. The story of the sheep and the goats addresses elemental human needs that

take a thousand forms, and each of us encounters them in different ways (Matt. 25:31–46). The Samaritan in Jesus’ parable showed himself sensitive to God’s call within the exigencies of a crisis situation (Luke 10:30–37). The situational realities in any particular family, community, work place, or church are not the same. What needs godly attention in your time and place, in your church, in your community? . . .

Jesus’ calling was not shaped by the general need of fallen humankind, as if he lived, taught, healed, and died for a nameless abstraction. His life took its specific shape from a thousand particulars of the people with names among whom he walked and talked. God’s calling to you is not individualistic. He connects you to your context. Where are you located?⁷

In other words: look down!

Let me share a little bit more from my own story again here and show you how this second “look” played out for me. When God saved me near the end of my freshman year of college, I found myself longing to serve in any way that I could. Naturally, one of the greater needs in any church is usually kids ministry so that’s where I began. And I loved it.

But then, a few years down the line, there was an opening in the church for interns, and so I jumped at that. And I got more opportunities to serve, and even some opportunities to lead.

Through this, a door opened for me to start and pastor a college ministry. So I came back after graduating and was there in San Luis Obispo for five more years—on staff at that very same church where I first got saved.

Then, while pastoring the college ministry, God led us to put on regular mission trips to San Francisco with the students. And that’s really where we began developing a heart for the Bay Area. And, while I felt called to go get more training from a seminary in Philadelphia, both my wife and I hoped that afterwards we might somehow end up back here—though, at the time, we had no idea how.

⁷ David Powlison, “What Is Your Calling?,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28:3 (2014): 87.

But now here we are. And I would wager one of the reasons I was looked upon favorably when I applied for the role of Lead Pastor of this church is because I'd done some work in the Bay Area previously. In other words: all along the way, if I had just held off because I was looking to get somewhere else, I never would've gotten there. As we try to be faithful and guided by love in the present, using everything we have to serve, that's what God uses to connect us to whatever he's got coming for us in the future.

So look down. What needs do you see around you right here where your feet are located? Pray about it, sure, but don't stay still on it for too long. Get busy in love for God and others and he'll show you more as you go!

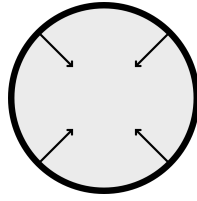


Look at those two questions given to us by C.J. Mahaney again: "where has God placed me?"; and "where am I positioned to serve others?" Take time to prayerfully and carefully reflect. How would you answer?

Digging a little deeper, when you consider the place in which God has put you, what needs do you see? Get specific. Make a list. Pray over it. Lay it all out before the Lord. How would love for God and others guide you forward?

Look #3: Look In

With this third look I'm simply encouraging you to consider now your own desires and passions. How has God wired you? What do you get excited about? What lights you up? What do you like to do? What do you want to do? As I've heard Tim Keller put it: "What needs do you vibrate to?"



So you look down and you realize: yes, in this place that God has put me, there's no shortage of needs and opportunities. But what then? Well, certainly you look up and pray, as we've said; but you also look in and ponder: "What do I actually feel drawn to?"

As a young Christian, in my spiritual immaturity, I used to think that desires were inherently evil. If I want it, it must be bad, or wrong, or selfish. Now, it's true, our desires can often lead us astray and into sin (cf. James 1:14-15; 4:1-2). But they can also be indicators of where God has gifted us and where he may be calling us.

If you need some Bible for this, consider:

- Paul tells us that an elder should be someone who "*aspires* to the office" and that "he *desires* a noble task" (1 Tim. 3:1). You don't want a guy in that role who doesn't even want to be there. It's on his heart. He's excited about it. His desire isn't inherently wrong. It's often a sign of God's calling.
- Peter gets at the same thing in 1 Peter 5:2 when he says that elders should "shepherd the flock of God that is among [them], exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but *willingly*, . . . *eagerly*."
- Paul, calling for the Corinthian church to help meet the needs of the saints in Jerusalem, says: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a *cheerful* giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). Your giving comes from the heart, not from a guilt-trip or something like that.
- In Jeremiah 20:9, the prophet writes: "If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot." There's a fire burning on the inside. I have to speak. I want to speak.

I could keep going, but I think you get the idea. Your desires and passions are often the way God reveals your gifts to you and connects them to the real needs of people around you.

Now, I should say, this can be considered from both a positive and negative direction. In the positive, we could talk about what you love doing (as we've just done together). In the negative, we could talk about what bugs you—what you notice that's off.

Consider this with me now. Often we see the church and things through the lens of our own giftings. So for example, because my gifts, I think, are more in preaching and teaching, when I come into a church, I'm usually most tuned in and even critical (if I'm not careful!) on this point. "The preacher didn't even get to the gospel. He skipped over that verse. It was all surface-level." And so forth. On the one hand, this could simply be an indication that I'm a crusty, judgmental jerk, right? But, on the other hand, it's also quite possible that I notice what's off or what's missing because that's an area that I'm passionate about; it's an area that I'm, perhaps even, gifted in.

So, at a broader level, here's how this might play out:

- The people whose gifts track more in line with the prophetic, they're passionate about truth. They notice when the church seems a little lite on Bible. "They're squishy on Scripture. Someone needs to step in and teach."
- Likewise, the people whose gifts track more in line with the priestly, they're passionate about relationships and ministries of mercy and things like this. So they notice when a church is seemingly cold and dry. "Okay, they have truth here, but where's the love? Everyone's just getting beat up with the Bible."
- And, finally, the people whose gifts track more in line with the kingly, they're passionate about order and systems. They notice when the structure of the church seems off and things are in disarray. "Okay, you may have truth and love, but it's all a mess. We can't get anything done, because no one's organizing and leading the charge."

Do you see how your own desires and passions can be an indicator of where you may be gifted? I hope you do! But I hope you also see that, in all of this, we really need each other. Because you may notice one thing that's off with this or that person, but, as we've said earlier, they'll notice another thing that's off with you! And if you both just stand there a safe distance away, blasting the other, you miss the point. No one person is supposed to have it all. We are "the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27). Don't act like your gift is the one everyone else is supposed to care most about. You need them to care about what they do. And they need you to care about what you do.

So let me encourage you: don't fall off the other side of your assessment of a church into judgmentalism and hypercriticism. That's ultimately just Pharisaism. The Pharisees loved to point out what was wrong with others, but they wouldn't lift a pinky finger to help them. On the contrary: if you see a hole, fill it; if you see a chink in the armor, cover it; if you see a wound, bandage it; if you see a need, meet it. Don't just grumble from the sidelines. Get in, use your gifts, and do something about it!

If you see a hole, fill it; if you see a chink in the armor, cover it; if you see a wound, bandage it; if you see a need, meet it. Don't just grumble from the sidelines. Get in, use your gifts, and do something about it!

If I could share from my own story again. When I got saved, I was so hungry for God's Word. The appetite I had, it was insatiable. I could not get enough. And so my knowledge of Scripture quickly started to outpace even guys who'd been Christians for most of their lives. And do you want to know what I did because of this? Sadly, I judged them. I

would call them out, speak down to them. I figured everyone was supposed to be like me—to have the same passions that I did.

But then, at one point, my Bible study leader at the time, always gracious, said: “Nick, you need to stop harping on these other guys. Maybe your passion for the Bible is actually an indication of how God is gifting you and where he might be calling you.” And, at that point, it dawned on me: maybe this is something God’s doing with me; maybe he doesn’t have to do it in quite the same way with everyone else. And, looking back, I think my Bible study leader was right!



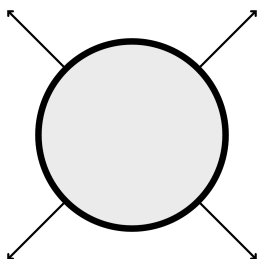
Considered positively, how do you think God has wired you? What do you get excited about? What lights you up? What do you like to do? What do you want to do? Considered negatively, where do you tend to be more critical of churches and people? Why is this? Do you notice some overlap between the positive and negative perspectives here? Having looked a little closer at all these things now, would you say your gifts seem to track more in line with the prophetic, the priestly, or the kingly?

Reconsider that list of needs you began forming for the second look. Which of these needs do you “vibrate” to? Why? What might God be calling you to do about it?

Look #4: Look Out

With this fourth look I’m simply inviting you to look out now and consider: up to this point in your life, where have you been fruitful? Where has God already been using you? What do you feel skilled at? What do you think you’re gifted at? It’s one thing to be passionate about

something. It's quite another to actually be good at it, right? So look out and consider: where have you seen fruit?



It's at this point that I'd like to accent a very important principle in all of this: namely, we discern our gifts in the context of community. Self-knowledge, and even knowledge of God and his will for us, is a community project. Without a loving, faithful community of saints around us I fear we wouldn't be able to make much headway in this.

*We discern our gifts in the
context of community.*

I bring this up now under the call to look out because of our propensity to be self-deceived concerning where we're fruitful and what we're good at. You might *think* you're great at something, but the only way you really *know* is if people start to actually recognize and affirm it.

Until then we may very well be like some of those folks in the opening auditions of *American Idol*. Every year the show begins with these auditions they hold in various cities around America. People come from all over to try out and see if they have what it takes to make it to Hollywood and enter the competition.

And, of course, some are great. But then, inevitably, some are just (I hate to say it) laughably bad. They come in self-confident, dressed like pop-stars, famous in their own minds already, certain that their musical gifts will set them apart from the others. And then they open their mouth

to “sing” and you’re just left thinking: whatever gifts this individual has (and I really am certain they have some), singing is most definitely not one of them! “Brother, you’re passionate about it. You want it. But you don’t got it.”

And those watching this play out at home, like me, we’re left wondering: how is it that no one in this guy’s life loved him enough to tell him the truth before it got to this point—where he’s making a fool of himself on national television? Maybe people did tell him and he didn’t listen. I don’t know.

But I share this here because it’s a parable, I think, of what we’re all prone to do. And we need to be careful. We discern our gifts in the context of community. So we don’t just look in, we also look out.

This is essentially what Paul is doing in Galatians 2 where he’s recounting these revelations he’s received from Jesus along with a sense of his own calling, but he wants to confirm it all with trusted leaders in the church, with the apostles who had come before him. So he writes:

I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. (vv. 1-2)

And then down in verse 7 he continues:

[W]hen they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (vv. 7-9)

Do you see what he’s doing? He’s checking in. Am I off here? Or am I on track? He doesn’t just go barreling on. He lets in wise counsel.

The book of Proverbs, you recall, is chock full of this same sort of thing:

- Proverbs 11:14: "Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety."
- Proverbs 15:22 is similar: "Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed." The idea is simple: get people around you who can confirm or deny what you're thinking and feeling and provide you with meaningful feedback.
- Proverbs 18:1 puts it negatively: "Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment."
- Proverbs 20:18 puts it like this: "Plans are established by counsel; by wise guidance wage war." Don't just run off into something. Talk to people about it.
- Proverbs 27:5-6 gives us yet another layer of insight: "Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy." In other words: choose your counselors wisely. Don't just surround yourself with yes-men or women. Find people who will be honest with you—not unnecessarily critical and harsh, but honest and real, in love.

So, listen, certainly you want to assess things personally. Where do you think you're gifted and skilled? Where do you think you've been fruitful? But don't stop there. Open the door for others in your life to share their thoughts and opinions with you as well.

Allow me to say one last thing. Seen from another angle, this means that when we're in community as Christians, we ought to be encouraging and affirming one another whenever we see people using the gifts God has given them. We need to recognize that everyone around us right now is on a journey of discernment and discovery and our encouragement can really help them along in uncovering where they're gifted and where God's calling them. Don't just wait until someone comes to you and asks. Be proactive. Speak up if someone has been a blessing to you. Let them know.

This really is the other side of that *American Idol* dynamic I've referenced. You see, as I've said, every season there are people who come

to the auditions that should never be there. They're just not gifted for this. That's true. But then, on the flip side, every season there are also people who are unbelievably talented, and yet the only reason they even gathered enough courage to try out is because someone else effectively dragged them there. Someone else could see their gift even when they couldn't. So they come in all timid and embarrassed and certain that they're just going to get cut "... but my buddy told me I had to try ... but my grandma told me I had to try ... but my coworkers told me had to try ... so here I am." And then they open their mouth to sing, and the judges are just blown away, and America is just blown away, and that individual is just blown away—because they couldn't even imagine anyone would think they're any good. And they're awesome! And they start to grow in that gift because of someone else's encouragement.

Speaking with a view to my own story once more: if no one came up to me and encouraged me, if they just assumed for whatever reason that I already knew God was using me in this or that way, I very well may never have even pursued the course I did. I can't tell you how many times it was a person's response to my attempts to preach, or lead musical worship, or whatever else it might have been, that kept me going. I'd be ready to quit, and then along would come some grace of God for me in the form of an email or text or conversation—a person saying a simple thank you, expressing how God used me to minister to them. And, suddenly, fresh wind would fill my sails. "Maybe, just maybe, God is with me in this!"

So your encouragement really matters. This doesn't mean be fake or plastic. We're not talking about empty praise or flattery. We're talking about honest feedback and expressions of gratitude for the gifts God has given a person. Who knows. Your encouragement could be just the thing God uses to lead them into his calling and purpose for them.

Up to this point in your life, where have you been fruitful? Where has God already been using you? Have others ever communicated being blessed by you in some way? What was the reason? How might this help you get a clearer sense of your gift(s)?

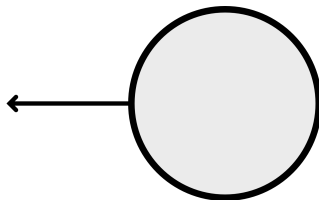


Seek counsel and feedback from other mature, wise Christians who know you well and will speak honestly with you in love. Where have they seen you to be fruitful? What do they think your gifts might be? Where are you weak? Where are you strong? What do they think God is calling you to do?

Now, consider the community of Christians around you. Ask the Lord to help you identify one person you can encourage. Express thanks for the way their gifts have blessed you!

Look #5: Look Backward

With this fifth look I am simply encouraging you to look back at where you've come from, where you've been. In other words: I want you to think about your own story for a bit.



We all have a different constellation of life experiences in our background that, in many ways, gives shape to the kind of ministry God may have for us now and in the future. Think about your family history, your education, your vocation, your ethnicity, your testimony. Think about your blessings and your hardships, your victories and your losses, your accomplishments and your failures, your joys and your sorrows.

I'll let Powlison speak again to us on this point:

The true God does not inhabit some religious sector or spiritual sphere, expecting us to come to him. He works in the mundane, and comes to us in the normal activities of daily life. Daniel and Moses were educated in the knowledge and ways of the governing class, and so could rise to positions of authority while living in exile. Paul could be the bridge from the Jews to the nations because he was both an educated Pharisee and a Roman citizen. Moses and David were equipped to look out for the welfare of others by years spent shepherding sheep. Older women are equipped to help younger women by their life experience (Titus 2:4). Paul could encourage people facing any sort of trouble because of how he found encouragement in his particular trouble (2 Cor. 1:4). God uses everything. Have you worked in a factory? Learned Spanish? Battled cancer? Been disillusioned by a fallen leader? Made millions in business? Raised a disabled child? Been sexually molested? Had an abortion? Done a graduate degree? Come off of street drugs? Been fascinated by South Asia since childhood?

Your calling almost always unfolds along a trajectory. It bears an organic relationship to how your life has unfolded, and expresses the fundamental continuities in your story.⁸

⁸ David Powlison, "What Is Your Calling?," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 28:3 (2014): 86.

Your past, even before coming to Christ, is not irrelevant to your future. God invariably weaves the two together. Where you've come from will connect in some way to where you're going.

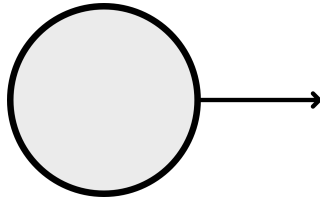
Your past, even before coming to Christ, is not irrelevant to your future. God invariably weaves the two together. Where you've come from will connect in some way to where you're going and it can often be an indicator of where you've been uniquely gifted and how he may want to use those gifts in service of others.



Take time to consider your life story. Think about your family history, your education, your vocation, your ethnicity, your testimony. Think about your blessings and your hardships, your victories and your losses, your accomplishments and your failures, your joys and your sorrows. What have you been given in all of this that you might be called by God to give away in love to others? How do such things give shape to who you are and help you discern a bit more of what you're called to do?

Look #6: Look Forward

With this last look I simply want to encourage you to go and try things. Take steps of faith and look forward to what God will do. He'll lead you onward and upward from here!



You don't have to get it perfect from the start. You're not always going to have all these looks line up. You're not always going to be excited about serving. You're not always going to feel like you're good at it. It's not always going to correspond with your past experiences. But look forward, take steps, and try things anyway.

Sometimes we can stall out at this point because of selfishness or fear. On the first—regarding *the stall-out of selfishness*—we can come up with all sorts of excuses as to why we shouldn't jump in and help. "I look in and I don't feel it." "I look out and I'm no good at it." "I look back and it doesn't fit my story." Okay, but here's where I'd point out that with this sixth look we really do wrap back around to that sixth truth I shared with you earlier: it's all for love. In other words: when it comes to stepping forward and using your gifts, let love be your guide more than anything else.

This means there actually is a prioritized order to these six looks. We begin with God and prayer, but next best is looking down and just meeting needs. Before we talk about what I want and what I'm passionate about, before we talk about what I'm good at or what I have experience in or what I feel equipped for—our first priority is to just move out in love in an effort to meet needs and serve people. You get going with that and the rest very well may follow. You might find that you come to enjoy something you never would have expected at the start, or that you're good at something you never could have imagined being good at. You never know. Jump in. Look forward.

On the second—regarding *the stall-out of fear*—I think some of us don't want to take a step because we're afraid to fail. I'm kind of this way. I can be a bit of a perfectionist. I want a guarantee of success before I even start. And so I can fall victim to that which you've probably heard referred to as "paralysis by analysis." I think it over, and think it

over, pray it over, and pray it over. I can journal and do all these first five looks again and again. And I could do all this until Jesus returns and time's run out. Because I wanted to get it right—like that guy who just buries the talents he'd been given because he was too scared he'd get it wrong (Matt. 25:14-30).

God doesn't care so much about perfection and success in this like we often do. He cares about the process as we try our best to love and serve and commit ourselves to listening and learning along the way.

I'm prone to that. And so I need this sixth look. And maybe some of you do too. God doesn't care so much about perfection and success in this like we often do. He cares about the process as we try our best to love and serve and commit ourselves to listening and learning along the way. We don't need to pray and ponder forever. We need to go. We need to take steps of faith in love for God and others. And he'll lead us. He'll keep writing that poem with our lives. He'll help us identify and use our gifts!

Are you prone more to the stall-out of selfishness or the stall-out of fear? Why do you think? How does the gospel set the gears of your heart back in motion and move you out in love for God and others?



Think back to the start of this booklet. Consider the way you answered that opening question regarding your sense of what your own “spiritual gift(s)” might be. Has your sense of things changed through the course of reading and reflecting? What further clarity on the matter do you have now? How do you think God has gifted you? What do you think God is calling you to do? How can you “use your gifts”?

Want More?

If you are wanting to engage the subject matter found in this booklet further, you might consider the following resources:

- *Biblical Productivity* by C.J. Mahaney
- “What Is Your Calling?” by David Powlison
- *What Are Spiritual Gifts?* by Vern Poythress

Need Help?

Our leaders at Mercy Hill would love to help you take this next step! If you’d like someone to chat, pray, or read with along the way please don’t hesitate to reach out to us at info@mercyhillchurch.org.

What's Next?

Having learned a bit more about using our gifts, let's now begin to consider how we might move outside the church towards the unbelieving in our city and world in an effort to share with them the good news of Jesus. Check out the next step: *Spread the News*. Find more info at the Next Steps Table on a Sunday or online at mercyhillchurch.org.

When God saves you and brings you into community in the church, he has something for you to do. He has a ministry, a purpose for your being here. Every Christian has at least one gift given them in and by the Spirit. And God wants you to use, to steward, to leverage that gift for his glory and the good of others.

But where do you even begin in all this? It's one thing to know that every Christian has a spiritual gift. It's another thing to know what your gift actually is. This Next Steps Resource has been created to help you discern what your gift(s) might be and how you can best use it for the building up of Christ's body and the advancement of his kingdom in this world!



Consider Jesus

For those skeptical or curious about Christianity and the claims of Jesus.



Be Baptized

For those ready to say yes to Jesus and "go public" with their faith.



Walk the Sacred Path

For those wanting to grow in their devotional lives (e.g. Bible reading, prayer).



Become a Member

For those interested in going all in with this local church and committing to "be the body" here and now together.



Join a Home Group

For those wanting to move towards community and live on mission for Jesus with others in the church.



Pursue Discipleship

For those interested in going deeper in their faith and growing more in the image of Christ.



Use Your Gifts

For those interested in identifying the gifts God has given them and using those gifts to serve in the church.



Spread the News

For those interested in evangelistic training and opportunities.



Serve the City

For those interested in getting their hands and feet dirty in love for others in our city and world.

Our leaders at Mercy Hill would love to help you take this next step! If you'd like someone to chat, pray, or read with along the way please don't hesitate to reach out to us at info@mercyhillchurch.org.