

## SMART AS A GOAT I Corinthians 12: 4-11

A farmer from Bulgaria, Mihail Janko, is convinced that his goat has a very special talent: it can discern a person's character. Janko claims that he can put pictures of people in front of the goat and the goat will show, by his behavior, whether the person in the picture is of good or bad character. Evidently, the goat head-butts pictures of "unpleasant people," but eats the pictures of pleasant people. Janko has even relied on the goat's special talent to help him choose boyfriends for his four daughters. Some of you parents would like to buy his goat, I know.

Don't you wish sometimes that you had a gift for discernment like this goat has? Wouldn't it make life so much easier if we could weed through bad and good people without any effort? You may find this hard to believe, but according to our scripture passage for today, you are gifted just as this goat is gifted. Listen to these words: "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 working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone." "In everyone." That includes you . . . and me.

**THE FIRST LESSON TO LEARN FROM THIS PASSAGE IS THAT THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT, ALL BELIEVERS ARE BLESSED WITH SOME SPIRITUAL GIFT.** All believers. That means you too. Your first reaction may be surprise. "Who me? Forget it, pastor. There's nothing special about me." I'm continually surprised to meet dedicated Christians who have no idea what their spiritual gift is, or are too afraid to claim it and use it. Don't devalue yourself. When you chose to follow Christ, you received the blessing of the Holy Spirit. There was placed within you a special skill or ability that is powered by the Holy Spirit and is absolutely necessary for the work of the church.

Let me tell you a very special story: Many years ago, a man named Demos Shakarian arranged evangelistic meetings around California. He would find the speaker, reserve the arena, send out the advertising. Demos felt that God had gifted him to help others, to encourage and enable the gifts of those around him. Thousands of people came to Christ at the evangelistic meetings Demos arranged. Then, in 1957, a friend convinced Demos that he should preach his own evangelistic meeting. Demos didn't feel this was God's purpose for him, but he went along with it. His friend reserved a huge arena. He saturated the town with advertising. Yet Demos couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't God's will and God wouldn't bless it. The night of the meeting came and . . . no, let's stop there. I'll get back to the story later.

But this story brings up an important question: how do you know what your spiritual gift is? What are the signs? For one thing, your spiritual gift will be

something that stimulates and fulfills you. When you perform that certain task, whether helping others, giving generously, or interpreting the Bible, you will feel like you are "in flow," like you've just found the perfect fit for a puzzle piece. God doesn't call us to a ministry without first equipping us for it. You are part of the grand human puzzle that makes up the body of Christ. Without your special gifts, the puzzle is incomplete.

Even when we know our gift, many of us make the mistake of devaluing our particular contributions to the church. We think our gift is not all that special.

"I like helping other people," we say to ourselves. That's just the way I am. There's nothing special about that." "I guess I just have a mind for numbers," someone else will say, "that's why I like the finance team. But I could never do something really special, like teach a class or sing a solo."

We tend to create a false hierarchy of gifts. There are the spotlight gifts, gifts that are obvious and naturally draw a lot of attention. Preaching, teaching, singing, all types of performance gifts are usually the ones that grab the spotlight. Then there are the servant gifts. These are the less-public gifts, like the gift of administration, or the gift of giving, or the gift of discernment. These gifts are not often put on display. No one applauds over a particularly well run committee meeting. We tend to ignore or downplay the servant gifts, and yet this passage in Corinthians emphasizes that all the gifts are equal. All the gifts are necessary.

An ancient legend tells of a king who walked into his garden one day to find almost everything withered and dying. Speaking to an oak near the gate, he learned that it was sick of life because it was not tall and beautiful like the pine. The pine was upset, for it could not bear delicious fruit like the pear tree, while the pear tree complained that it did not have the lovely odor of the spruce; and so it went throughout the entire garden.

Coming to a pansy, however, the king saw its bright face full of cheerfulness. "Well, little flower," said the monarch, "I'm glad to find at least one that is happy in this discouraging scene."

"Your majesty, I know I'm of small account, but I decided you wanted a pansy when you planted me. If you had desired an oak or a pear tree, you would have put one in my place. Therefore I've determined to be the best flower I can be!"

There's a reason why God made each of us to have certain gifts and skills and temperaments. There is an awesome purpose behind our abilities.

THE SECOND POINT OF TODAY'S BIBLE PASSAGE IS THAT OUR GIFTS ARE A PART OF OUR INTERDEPENDENCE AS THE BODY OF CHRIST; WE NEED EACH OTHER TO USE AND ENCOURAGE OUR GIFTS SO WE CAN GROW IN SPIRITUAL MATURITY. It's hard for us to admit our interdependence. We like to think we are self-made people.

A study of the National Basketball Association from 1996-1997 shows that players are making fewer and fewer assists statistically than they did ten years ago. In practical terms, this means that they aren't passing the ball much. They aren't playing like a team. And this failure to pass is leading to a drop in scoring.

According to Mike Wise in the New York Times (2/8/98), "After making nearly 48 % of their shots from the field ten years ago, teams are now making less than 45 %. What's more, fewer players are passing the ball. Ten years ago teams averaged 51.2 assists--passes leading directly to a score--each game. Today the number is 43.6."

Coach Larry Brown of the Philadelphia 76ers said it this way, a couple of years ago when Michel Jordan was still playing: "The NBA promotes individuals, not teams. When the Bulls are playing Miami, it's Alonzo Mourning against Michael Jordan, instead of the great Chicago Bulls against the great Miami Heat. It sends a bad message. Why play a team sport and not help your teammates?"

We in the church can be just as guilty of having a "me-me-me" mind-set. We forget that the church is the ultimate team. A basketball team consisting of all point guards would rank in the bottom of their league. We need each member of the "team" to use his or her special gifts to make the church complete.

Bishop T.D. Jakes makes the point that few of us move outside our comfort zones in life. We hang around with people who are like us: people who are in our same profession, or of our same race or religious preference or from our neighborhood. There is value in finding people who are like you. But you could greatly enrich your life by stepping outside your relational comfort zone too. As Bishop T. D. Jakes says, "There is a difference between harmony, which is derived from two distinctly different notes that blend together, and unison, the same note made at the same time. Harmony is far more appealing to the ear than unison. Your relationships should be harmonious without being in unison." When we fail to value and use all the spiritual gifts in the church, then we are guilty of singing in unison. When all the spiritual gifts are valued equally and used effectively, then the church has the most impact on the world around it. The church was made to work in harmony.

AND FINALLY, OUR PASSAGE FOR TODAY TELLS US THAT OUR SPIRITUAL GIFTS EMPOWER THE CHURCH. I Peter 4: 10-11 says, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ." Sometimes we forget that our spiritual gifts are not limited by our own human potential; they are powered by the Holy Spirit. Our gift is the kindling wood; the Spirit is the fire.

Early in the last century a great evangelist closed his sermon with an appeal for his hearers to surrender their lives to Christ. A score or more responded, among them a woman of wealth, who was well known in social circles. She asked the minister if she might say a few words. Imagine the surprise of all when she said: "I wanted to tell you why I have come forward tonight. It was not because of the excellent sermon delivered by the preacher, but because of the sermon I have seen from day to day in the life of this little woman sitting near me. Her hands are disfigured and hardened by daily toil; the burdens of years have stooped her frame. She is just a humble washerwoman. For a number of years she has served my home, but in all this time, her life has been above even the slightest reproach. Not one unkind word has passed her lips; not one frown have I seen upon her brow; not once has she become impatient, although she might have found many excuses for so doing.

"Under the most trying conditions she has manifested a sweet Christian spirit. Quietly she has done countless little acts of love for others. I am sorry to say it, but I have sneered at her simple faith, and taunted her for her childlike trust in God. But when trouble came to my home, when my little girl was snatched from me by the cruel hand of death, it was this humble child of God who brought the first ray of hope to my troubled soul. There is a sweet magnetism about her consistent life that has drawn me to the Savior, and there is a longing in my heart to love and follow her Master."

The minister asked that the godly washerwoman should come forward. Happy tears were streaming down her cheeks, and her face was lighted up with joy. "I want to introduce you," said the evangelist, "to the real preacher of the evening."

A humble washerwoman used her spiritual gifts to bring the light of Christ into her employer's life. Isn't that the whole purpose of the church: to bring Christ's light to others? Isn't that the whole ball of wax, the whole nine yards? The church cannot reach its full power and potential without all members using their gifts for the common good.

You remember our friend, Demos? The man who arranged evangelistic meetings? Here's the rest of his story: Sure enough, on the night of the meeting, no

one showed up. There were Demos, a few of his friends, and four arena custodians. Demos was so discouraged that he couldn't bring himself to speak. But among his friends was a housekeeper named Lottie Jefferson. Lottie had always dreamed of speaking in a place like that. She marched up on stage and began to preach. And when she finished, the head custodian came stumbling up the aisle, tears coursing down his face, and gave his life to Jesus.

Who knew that Lottie Jefferson, a housekeeper, had the gift of evangelism? God knew. He blesses each of us with unique gifts, not for our own glory, but for the good of the church and our society. Then He empowers us with the incredible power of the Holy Spirit. You were blessed with a spiritual gift so that you could be a blessing to others. This church needs you. This world needs you. Will you answer the call?