

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 58

Gifts

Christmas 2009 has come and gone. For most of us, the holidays included a time of giving and receiving gifts. There is something wonderful about giving or receiving a gift. Gifts display caring, thoughtfulness, and they stir up feelings of appreciation and love.

Did you see the Dilbert cartoon that was published Christmas Day?



There are gnawing questions buried in the humor of the cartoon. Why do we give gifts? What is the right attitude behind giving and receiving gifts? Reading the cartoon prompts questions of how to value a gift. Is the value in the cost of the gift? Surely not, lest we reduce gift giving to the suggested electronic transfer!

Much of the value of the gift lies in the thoughtfulness that produced the gift including the intentions of the giver. These factors are reflected in the attitude of the giver (who likes a gift given for the wrong reason?). We also can see the thoughtfulness behind the gift by how the gift plugs into our life and needs. We readily notice the difference between a randomly selected gift and one that was clearly chosen to fill a need/desire that we have.

Gifts are not a phenomena of the modern person living today. Gifts have been given as far back as the earliest evidences of civilization. Biblically, we read of God giving Adam and Eve the Garden of Eden with attendant opportunities and responsibilities. Once found sinful, God gave them gifts of clothing to cover their recently noticed nakedness.

Paul wrote of gifts. He wrote of gifts shared by his friends and co-workers in the mission field, but he also wrote quite a bit about gifts God gave to his people. It is these gifts we focus on today, considering what they were, why they were given, as well as the attitude of the giver (God)!

GETTING A FEW TERMS STRAIGHT

It was fun on Christmas day to sit around and listen to the children talk about what gifts they received. We had our own children as well as nieces and nephews from around the United States. Among the 20 some odd voices (all under the age of 18), we heard words like "loot," "haul," as well as the more typical "presents," and gifts."

We have some wonderful English words to reflect presents. Similarly, the language in Paul's day was not limited to one word when speaking of gifts, yet we find something interesting in the writing of Paul in his word choice. Paul's unique approach to his vocabulary is where we start this study.

Basic "gift" - The typical word used for "gift" was the Greek *doron* (δωρον). This is the word used in Matthew 2:11 speaking of the gifts brought Christ by the wise men ("Then, opening their treasures, they offered him **gifts** (*doron*), gold and frankincense and myrrh"). It is the same word used in Revelation 11:10 where John wrote of the joy experienced by the world at the death of the two witnesses adding, "those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange **presents** (*doron*)."¹ In addition to Matthew and John, we read Luke using the word, as well as Mark and the author of Hebrews.

Paul, however, uses this typical word just once, in Ephesians 2:8:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the **gift** (*doron*) of God.

Rather than use the commonplace word for gift, we read Paul using a different assortment of terms.

Official Gift - A second word for "gift" which Paul did use a good bit was a related word *dorea* (δωρεα). Greek scholar Friedrich Buschel explained that this word for gift "seems to be more legal...and denotes formal endowment."¹ In other words, unlike the common word for gift (*doron*) this word (*dorea*) refers to a formal or structured gift. This is seen outside the New Testament as the word was used for an estate granted by a king, a grant given by the government, or some other official privilege.²

¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans 1964) V. 2 at 167.

² Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford 1968) at 464. It also "designates formal donations (honors, bequests, fees, wedding presents)." *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans 1990) V.1 at 364.

Paul uses this official/formal word for gift in several places. Each time Paul used *dorea*, he did so tying the gift to God as the giver (If the word emphasizes a formal endowment, then God is the “Formal Endower!”). In Romans 5, Paul uses it twice writing that the grace (v. 15) and righteousness (v. 17) we have from God are such gifts (*dorea*.) Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 9:15, Paul references God’s surpassing grace as an indescribable gift (*dorea*).

Another usage which seems to indicate a meaning of an official gift is found in Ephesians 3:7.

Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift (*dorea*) of God’s grace, which was given to me by the working of his power.

This usage emphasizes the official, formal designation of Paul’s ministerial appointment. In similar fashion to a King dispensing a title of estate, God gifted Paul with his grace in a way that set Paul up as God’s minister or servant.

Paul does not leave this as a gift simply set up for him in some special fashion. In the next chapter, Paul again uses the word *dorea* to speak of the way God has given his grace to all believers:

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift (*dorea*) (Eph. 4:7).

Free Gift - A very closely related word in the Greek is *dorean* (δωρεαν), which is “gift” with an emphasis of “freely given” or “given for nothing.”³ This concept of the freely given gift (*dorean*) is found in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians where he noted that he had “preached God’s gospel to you free of charge [*dorean*]” (2 Cor. 11:7). We see Paul’s emphasis of this “free” aspect again in 2 Thessalonians 3:8 where Paul wrote:

Nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.

The word translated “without paying for it” is *doreav*! Paul literally wrote that he did not eat anyone’s bread as a free gift! Paul paid for his own food.

Understanding the nature of this word for “gift” as one given freely and without any payment gives great import and power to Paul’s usage in Romans 3:24. There, Paul wrote of the Christian’s righteousness that overcomes the sinfulness which everyone has. Paul used *dorean* speaking of the Christian as “justified by his grace as a gift (*dorean*), through the redemption that is in Christ.” Paul made it

³ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* at 167.

clear that justification is not a gift earned, nor a gift God was obligated to give. No one has offered God any credible payment for this gift. Rather, God has freely given the believer redemption in Christ.

Spiritual Gift – Here, we arrive at some of Paul’s peculiar language, not readily seen in other New Testament writers⁴ nor even contemporary literature. Paul does not use the full term “gift of the Spirit” per se, but Paul does use the unusual term *charisma(ta)* (χαρίσμα) to speak of gifts of the Spirit. This word has been Anglicized in the church practice and doctrinal word “charismatic.” It is frequently used in this sense to speak of miraculous abilities or events that are outside the scope of normative expressions, and hence, are considered “gifts of the Spirit.”

But, this Anglicized usage “charismatic” is not a full representation of Paul’s term. Paul uses it in ways we do not consider “charismatic” today. Paul took a Greek word for “favor,” “grace,” or “kindness/goodwill” toward another (*charis* – χάρις) and changed it into a noun that refers to a concrete expression of such favor, grace, kindness or goodwill.⁵ As this concrete expression, we read of these gifts in a number of openly evident ways that go beyond the scope of what people today consider “charismatic.” We better understand Paul’s use of the word if we do not view it as a miraculous gift bestowed on a believer, but instead, see it as a concrete expression of God’s giving.

Paul used *charisma* 16 times. We can consider these passages in their contexts and see what conclusions can be fairly drawn from them. In doing so, we can lay a foundation for a study next lesson on those passages that current culture and church history view as “charismatic” expressions.

- **Romans 1:11** “For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual **gift** (*charisma*) to strengthen you”

This verse typifies the danger of our reading current issues of church charismatic controversy into biblical verses. Many approach this passage thinking that Paul was writing that once he arrived, he would give the Romans some miraculous abilities that they would not be able to get on their own. This reading is not, however, what most scholars (today or historically) perceive Paul to be saying.

Origen⁶ (c. 185-c. 254) was one of the early Christian commentators who wrote 15 books on Romans alone! Origen did not understand Paul to be writing about a

⁴ The only New Testament usage of the word *charisma* (χαρίσμα) outside of Paul is 1 Peter 4:10.

⁵ Fee, Gordon, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (IVP 1993) at 340.

⁶ For more on Origen, see Lesson 15 in our church history series. www.Biblical-literacy.com.

capital “S” Spiritual gift as a charismatic gift from the Holy Spirit. Origen drew the distinction between lower case “spiritual” gifts and gifts that are not spiritual. Origen believed that God, who “removes kings and sets up kings” (Dan. 2:21) at times gave the non-spiritual gifts of “riches and bodily strength, physical beauty and earthly power.”⁷ Origen contrasted these “non-spiritual” gifts with those he considered “spiritual” including the gifts of faith, wisdom, and knowledge. Origen understood this to mean that Paul wanted to come teach the Romans firsthand, imparting these spiritual qualities. This is born out by the following verse where Paul adds, “that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each others’ faith, both yours and mine.”

The unknown early Christian commentator (whom Erasmus named “Ambrosiaster” over 1,000 years later) wrote a thorough, well-respected commentary on Romans sometime between 366 and 384. Only recently available in English (and highly worth buying!), Ambrosiaster carefully dissected Romans verse by verse. He referenced this verse as indicating that the Romans were following some carnal ideas, acting in the name of Christ, but not following the teaching of Christ. Ambrosiaster believes Paul was concerned that his written teaching, *i.e.*, the letter we call Romans, might be applied improperly.⁸

On the modern front, New Testament scholar Douglas Moo notes that while some believe that Paul wanted to impart a miraculous gift of some sort, it is much more likely that Paul was speaking of some “insight or ability” that Paul would determine once he saw them in person so that he might strengthen them in their faith.⁹

- **Romans 5:15 – 16** “But the **free gift** (*charisma*) is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift (*dorea*) by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift (*dorea*) is not like the result of that one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the **free gift** (*charisma*) following many trespasses brought justification.”

⁷ See the selections from Origen set out in Bray, Gerald, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Romans* (IVP 1998) at 22-23.

⁸ Ambrosiaster’s commentary is now available in the IVP series of ancient Christian commentaries. See Bray, Gerald, *Ambrosiaster: Commentaries on Romans and 1-2 Corinthians* (IVP 2009).

⁹ Moo, Douglas, *The Epistle to the Romans- The New International Commentary* (Eerdmans 1996) at 60-61.

Here, we see interplay for Paul between two different words for “gift.” As noted earlier, Paul wrote of a *dorea* gift – the official, formal type gift. Paul alternates this formal gift terminology with Paul’s unique word *charisma*. This leaves the English reader without the benefit of Paul’s nuanced language. Namely that God’s grace has been given concrete expression in the formal gift of justification that flows from the death of Christ on Calvary, a concrete expression of God’s giving.

- **Romans 6:23** “For the wages of sin is death, but the **free gift** (*charisma*) of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Paul here contrasts the earned wages that are due from the act of sin (death) with the concrete expression of God’s gift in Jesus Christ (eternal life). As we consider Paul’s vocabulary, we once again are reminded of our cultural blindness if we limit the meaning of Paul’s *charisma* writings to matters we today call “charismatic.”

- **Romans 11:29** “For the **gifts** (*charisma*) and the calling of God are irrevocable.”

God does not do “take backs!” When God gives a gift, when we see a concrete expression of God’s giving, we need not live in fear that God will take his gift back. In the context of Romans 11, Paul was explaining that God did not take back his gift of election to Israel, nor will he take back his gift of mercy to the church.

- **Romans 12:6** “Having **gifts** (*charisma*) that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith”

Here, Paul writes of concrete expressions of God’s giving that many see as expressions of what today are considered “charismatic” gifts. Paul speaks of each believer using the different concrete expressions of God’s giving, the *charisma* gifts, in ways that build up the church. Paul delineates gifts of prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, contributing, leading, and acting in mercy. These gifts will be probed more carefully in the next lesson.

- **1 Corinthians 1:4-7** “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any **spiritual gift** (*charisma*), as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In English, we read of Paul writing again of a “spiritual gift” like he did in Romans 1:11 as noted earlier. Here, however, Paul did not add the word “spiritual” as a modifier for *charisma* gift as he did in Romans 1:11. The English translators have added “spiritual,” not Paul. Paul’s emphasis here is not on the types of gifts that the people were receiving. Rather, Paul is emphasizing the thoroughness of the concrete expressions of God in blessing the Corinthians with the testimony of Christ.¹⁰

- **1 Corinthians 7:7** “I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his own **gift** (*charisma*) from God, one of one kind and one of another.”

In this passage, Paul wrote of God’s gift as a concrete expression that displays itself in whether one is meant for marriage or celibacy. Paul writes in a way that indicates that both marriage and celibacy are *charisma* gifts. As Luther wrote, “Marriage is just as much a gift of God, St. Paul says here, as chastity is.”¹¹ Paul is emphasizing that the believer has his marital status from God and should live properly within that status, whichever it might be.

- **1 Corinthians 12** “Now there are varieties of **gifts** (*charisma*), but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord...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...to another **gifts** (*charisma*) of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles... And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then **gifts** (*charisma*) of healing, helping, administering, and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess **gifts** (*charisma*) of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher **gifts** (*charisma*). And I will show you a still more excellent way.”

This passage clearly lies within the realm of what we today call charismatic gifts, and will be explored further in the next lesson.

- **2 Corinthians 1:11** “You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the **blessing** (*charisma*) granted us through the prayers of many.”

Here is an interesting perspective on a concrete expression of God’s *charisma* gifts. Paul points out that he has been delivered from great afflictions and deadly

¹⁰ See also the comments of Thisleton, A., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans 2000); Bittlinger, A., *Gifts and Graces* (Hodder and Stoughton 1967)

¹¹ Luther, Martin, *Luther’s Works American Edition* (Fortress Press 1976) V. 28.

peril (verses 8-10). This deliverance he terms a *charisma* gift from God. He then links the gift of God to the prayers of the saints. As Harris puts it,

Divine deliverance, when it occurs, is always an undeserved blessing (*charisma*), but in some mysterious way it is intimately related to human intercession (cf. Phil. 1:19; Phlm. 22).¹²

This is in line with the teachings of Christ that we should pray for God's will to be done (Mt. 6:10). Since God placed Adam in the Garden and charged him with the tasks of working and keeping it (Gen. 2:15), there has been a role for man in seeing that God's will on earth is enacted. Paul and Christ emphasized this as a responsibility of praying believers.

- **1 Timothy 4:14** “Do not neglect the **gift** (*charisma*) you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.”

Timothy had a *charisma* gift, a gift that objectively was visible as one from God. It was clearly linked to the preceding verse where Paul exhorted Timothy to devote himself to exhortation and teaching. This was an objective, concrete expressive gift of God that was given to Timothy through the teaching and prophecy as the Word was taught to him at a time when the hands of the elders were laid on him. The laying on of hands signified the authority of the church that Timothy had when he exhorted and taught.¹³ We might think of this as a modern equivalent of ordination.

- **2 Timothy 1:6** “For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the **gift** (*charisma*) of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands”

Here, Paul urges Timothy to continue fanning into flame¹⁴ the *charisma* gift that came to Timothy through the laying on of Paul's hands. We agree with Lenski that Paul's point is not that Timothy had some spectacular charismatic gift that started with Paul laying hands on him. Rather as Paul was facing execution, he was passing the torch on to Timothy for the care and teaching oversight of certain churches. In that regard, Timothy was taking responsibilities to use his gifting

¹² Harris, Murray, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans 2005) at 160.

¹³ See the discussion in Lenski, R.C.H., *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon* (Hendrickson 1998) at 644ff.

¹⁴ In English, it might read as if Timothy had let the flame grow cold. That is not the impact of the Greek, however. Paul wrote with an expressive present infinitive verb form. It means to continue doing something already being done.

(exhortation and teaching noted in 1 Timothy 4 above) with the authority and as representative of Paul.¹⁵

CONCLUSIONS

As we return to our Christmas memories of gift giving and receiving, we note again the value of a gift. The value lies in the thoughtfulness of the giver as expressed in the need for the gift, the manner in which it is given, the reasons it is given, and more.

God has given gifts to his people. Once Paul used the simple ordinary term for gift (*doron*) in Ephesians 2 emphasizing that salvation is a gift from God – plain and simple. In other places, Paul explained that God gave gifts unique to each person, the gift each should have. This is true for marriage (1 Cor. 7:7) and for many other aspects of the Christian walk (1 Cor. 12). Paul at times emphasized the free nature of God’s gifts. In Romans 3:24 Paul used the “free gift” emphasis word *doreav* to drive home the declaration of our justification as one truly unmerited.

But over and over, we see for Paul the unusual usage of *charisma* gift. God gives his people objectively visible, concrete expressions of his giving nature. These special gifts are given out of God’s grace and emphasize his ministry, his purposes and his involvement, both in the life of each believer, and of the church at large.

In a recent episode of 30 Rock, Tina Fey’s character Liz Lemon is drawn into a competitive environment of gift giving against Jack Donaghy (played by Alec Baldwin). Supposedly, no one gives a gift as well thought out and on target as Jack, and a minor plot line in the episode is Liz’s repeated efforts to measure up to Jack as a gift giver. In historical truth, no one gives gifts like the Lord himself. Consider the contrast between God as King and the kings of this world.

While most kings receive gifts from their people, occasionally making an imperial grant, God as King is the ultimate gift-giver. In Ephesians 4:7 Paul wrote, “grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of God’s gift.” Here, Paul used the word *dorea* indicating the formal or official nature of the gift. Paul then shifted an emphasis from Psalm 68:18 by noting that as Christ “ascended on high, he led a host of captives, and he **gave gifts**¹⁶ to men.” Christ’s giving was not

¹⁵ Lenski at 754-5.

¹⁶ Here, Paul uses yet another word for gift. Paul uses *doma* (δομα). This word is typically a “payment” type gift. It is not a gift given for nothing, but rather one that is due. Paul uses it in one other place, Phil. 4:17 where Paul wrote of the Philippians’ gift that was sent him in Thessalonica. In Philippians, Paul is using the word as a gift that was properly sent to him. In Ephesians, the word fits especially well as Paul’s emphasis that Christ the victor is due gifts, but instead is giving the due payment out to the conquered!

simply recognition of the good and valuable citizen who received an imperial grant; rather, Christ gave gifts to the people he retrieved from rebellion!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “...justified by his grace as a **gift** (*dorean*), through the redemption that is in Christ” (Rom 3:24).

A free gift is very hard for us to understand and accept. We live in history’s apex of capitalism. Deeply ingrained into our psyche are concepts that “there is no such thing as a free lunch” or “if you want to dance, you’ve got to pay the band.” Even God’s gifts are hard for us to accept as freely given. It is much easier to say, “Yes, God has given the gift, but we have a role in taking it, opening it and appropriating it.” Now in some vein that may be true, but we must be careful to never tarnish the gift by treating it as anything less than fully and freely given. Let us thank God today and everyday for the free gift of life in his Son.

2. “Having **gifts** (*charisma*) that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them” (Rom. 12:6).

Let us not forget that even though God has freely given us gifts, he has not given them to us without purpose. The gifts are for seeing God’s will done on earth as it is in heaven. We are to use those gifts to build up the church (including ourselves) in faith and hope. They are for edifying the body. Let us use the gifts that God has given us to his glory and the furthering of his kingdom! Let us commit to next week coming to explore what we term the “Charismatic gifts” in more detail to see how they fit into this responsibility.

3. “You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the **blessing** (*charisma*) granted us through the prayers of many.” (2 Cor. 1:11).

Is it not a bit stunning to think that in some way, God dispenses concrete gifts in response to the prayers of believers? It is more soothing on us to think of God’s sovereignty as proceeding forth regardless of our prayers, yet we are told repeatedly that prayers of the saints do matter, they do affect the outcome. Let us decide that, in spite of the difficulty at understanding the interplay of God’s sovereignty and man’s actions, we will make a pointed effort to pray for God’s will on earth and in the lives of our loved ones.