

Text: I Peter 4: 8-11

This letter from Peter, apostle of Jesus Christ, was written to Christians scattered all over the northern part of Asia Minor.

**Most important of all, you must sincerely love each other. Each of you has been blessed with one of God's many wonderful gifts to be used in the service of others. So use your gift well. If you have the gift of speaking, preach God's message. If you have the gift of helping others, do it with the strength that God supplies. Everything should be done in a way that will bring honor to God because of Jesus Christ, who is glorious and powerful forever. CEV, or contemporary English version.**

**As good stewards of the varied gifts given you by God, let each use the gift he has received in the service to others. Revised English Bible.**

**As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. King James version.**

**It's clear that the message is the same, not mater which translation you read. You have a gift from God – use it.**

### What Is Your Gift?

Everything we do in this church to accomplish our mission requires that we share our God-given gifts for that purpose. We are here to serve, and not to expect to be served. We need you to share your gifts. You need to share- for YOU.

I have been and continue to be inspired by a book I read several years ago, called Give to Live, written by Dr. Doug Lawson, an ordained Methodist minister and a fundraising consultant. I have met him and heard him speak on several occasions, but reading his book has made an even greater impact on me and the way I look at giving. The basic theme of the book is: Give of your time, talent and treasure, and you will receive more in return.

Lawson outlines the benefits of giving in 3 broad categories: physical, emotional, and spiritual. This is what he writes:

Under physical benefits, he lists greater longevity, significant reduction in toxic stress chemicals in the body, and so, less stress, enhanced functioning of the immune system, decreased metabolic rate, improved cardiovascular circulation, healthier sleep, and help in maintaining good health.

Under emotional benefits, he lists increased self-acceptance, reduced self-absorption and sense of isolation, increased endorphin release (which provides a natural high), expanded sense of control over one's life and circumstances, increased ability to cope with crises, stronger feelings of personal satisfaction, improved concentration and enjoyment of experiences, enhanced compassion, empathy, and sensitivity to others, and reduced inner stress and conflict.

Under spiritual benefits, he lists a greater connectedness to God, more receptivity to spiritual guidance, heightened sense of appreciation and acceptance of others, sustained peace of mind, greater clarity about the meaning and purpose of life, and enhanced quality of life.

But that isn't just Doug Lawson's opinion. He backs it up with examples of scientific research. Let me mention a few of the studies he cites:

1. In a 9-year study of 7,000 Alameda, CA residents, two doctors, Berkman and Sym, found that active church members lived longer than those who did not belong to churches. Why is that? Is it just a coincidence? No, I think not.
2. Several years ago, studies in *Psychology Today*, *American Health*, and the Institute for Advancement of Health, have referred to a "helper's high." The human mind triggers special chemicals that enable us to feel more expansive, even euphoric. These chemicals called endorphins, are released during esteem-building activities such as working to help others.
3. Another study, by two Harvard doctors, McClelland and Hershnet, found, through using biofeedback to measure heart rate, blood pressure, temperature and brain waves - that people who – this will blow your mind – people who watched a documentary about Mother Teresa's work with the dying showed an increase in immunoglobulin A – the body's first defense against viral infection, suggesting that we can avoid stress and illness if we turn to helping others. People watching someone else helping others, can stay healthier?

4. Sociologist Allen Luks did a study of 1500 women volunteers. Many mentioned the enjoyable physical sensations they experienced while helping others and for some time afterward. This “helpers’ high” reduces the emotional stress that interferes with the body’s self-maintenance system. They spoke of increased energy, a satisfying state of calm, and a feeling of warmth and well being.
5. Other studies show one way to escape premature physical and emotional deterioration is by staying active in the service of others. Those who did regular volunteer work had death rates two and ½ times longer than those who didn’t. One of my friends from Missouri was the successful director of RSVP, Retired Senior Volunteer Program. She was so successful that she was asked by the national RSVP leader to go to Washington and testify before Congress on the need for funding for this program. She took with her a gentleman volunteer to testify. His closing remark was, “I don’t know why, but on Tuesday when I deliver Meals on Wheels, my arthritis doesn’t hurt me.” They got the funding!
6. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale wrote of a life insurance study of those who were 100 or older, in which they were asked, “What is the most important thing you have learned in your long life?” What would you guess they said? Most answered, “To love your neighbor as yourself.”

He maintained that they live longer because they have freed themselves from deadly negative influences such as anger, hatred, suspicion, guilt, and anxiety. They are free to help that neighbor.

Now, my friends, I am not suggesting that all of this be the motivation for you to present your body as “a living sacrifice.”

Don’t EXPECT more when you share your gifts in the service of God, in our church and in the community, but clearly, you are going to be better off.

What I AM saying - to repeat scripture – is that we each have received gifts from God – we are all “gifted” people – We are asked to be a living sacrifice, as Ed Johnson read, that is, to use our gifts – to share our gifts in order to serve God in our church and community.

We are not asked to offer a burnt offering of an unblemished male from the herd or flock, as the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament instructed.

Our sacrifice is “living” because it is brought alive to the altar and because it stays alive at the altar; it is ongoing. As Doug Lawson wrote, “Give of your time and talent, and you will receive more in return.”

A dramatic example of people giving their gifts took place just down the road on I-75 and west to the Gulf. – This is so exciting! - Rev. Carlan Helgeson, pastor of Spring Hill UCC had a dream of installing stained glass windows in the very plain row of windows in the sanctuary to enhance the experience of worship there. He knew it could be done because his previous congregation in Ohio had done just that. After the congregation agreed, he asked two women from his former church to fly down for a weekend and show the volunteer team in Spring Hill how it could be done. One member of his church, who is a retired fabric designer, gave her gift of designing the windows. A team of sixteen members actually worked on the windows.

The windows feature symbols of grapes and wheat to symbolize Holy Communion, a lamp representing wisdom, a pelican picking its own flesh to symbolize Christ’s sacrifice, three interwoven circles to represent the Trinity, a descending dove representative of the Holy spirit, and a butterfly to symbolize Christ’s resurrection. They also incorporated various seashells, representative of Florida. The pastor’s acquaintance, Poule d’Eau Kyle, a stained glass artist-craftsman from Tampa, agreed to help with the work as a way to give back to God. He said, “Besides wanting to see professionalism carried through with the glass, this was a way that I was able to repay my God for the blessings given to me.”

Kyle put in more than 300 hours into the project and estimates that the windows will last more than 100 years.

Pastor Helgeson said, “The windows are truly a beautiful gift to God and will teach and inspire generations of people who sit in the sanctuary and ponder the message and meaning of the symbols. As light shines through the windows, so the light of God’s presence will be felt in new ways in times of prayer and celebration.”

You may be thinking that your gift is not that dramatic or exciting, but it IS! If it comes from your heart, and is in response to God’s love, your gift is precious!

What is your gift (or what are your gifts)? We know some of those gifts that are described in Romans 12 that Ed read. And we know that many of you are using your gifts. But it IS tempting to just come to church on Sunday morning and sing and pray and read together and listen to the choir. That IS important! Maybe, though, that is just the minimum. What gifts are you willing to share?

Are you sharing your gift or gifts to serve God through our church? “to let God change the way you think,” as Paul wrote? When you share and serve, you are transforming yourself.

Maybe some of you need a little help in “unwrapping your God-given gifts.” Maybe you haven’t found what your gift is yet. The nominating committee here at our church, on which I serve, with Jane Kelly, Mary Helen New, Connie Stanley, and Mike West, would be so grateful if you would let us know what you would like to do, what gift you would like to share to serve God and our church. We are ready to speak with anyone who says he or she wants to serve. We welcome your initiative! We search all year to find people who will help us to accomplish our mission.

Don’t hide your light under a bushel!  
Remember the song, This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine.”

When all of us in our congregation let our lights shine, when we are serving by sharing our gifts, this church will truly be blessed. We are a beloved community now, but think how much more we can be when we all share our gifts.

Amen.