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**1 Peter 4:9–11, ESV.**

*<sup>10</sup> As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: <sup>11</sup> 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.*

**Acts 2:37–38, ESV.**

*<sup>38</sup> Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

**Charismata: being spiritual.**

I'd like to talk about a subtlety that has to do with the translation of ancient Greek New Testament manuscripts into English. The word “gift” appears in both of our passages today. But it is two different Greek words that have been translated into the word “gift” in these two passages. The first is from 1 Peter, Chapter 4. The second is from Acts, Chapter 2. We're going to see that there is a world of difference between the word “gift” in the passage from Acts, which is translated from the Greek word “*dorea*”, and the word “gift” in the quote from 1 Peter, which is translated from the Greek word “*charisma*” or “*charismata*” in the plural. *Dorea*

means, in a literal translation, simply “gift”, but *charisma* means much more. In Acts, Chapter 2, Pentecost has arrived, and the Holy Spirit has visited the Apostles as tongues of fire. Then people from a wide area who have come to Jerusalem for the festival are bewildered because each person hears the Apostles speaking in their own native language, not the native Aramaic, which is related to Hebrew, of the Apostles. Peter then addresses the crowd, talking about the way Jesus came as a fulfillment of Old Testament promises of a Messiah in the line of David. The Apostles are awed by this sermon and Peter tells the other Apostles:

*“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*

Peter uses the word *dorea*, gift, to refer only to the unearned granting of the Holy Spirit upon every believer. Although this is an incredible gift, he is only focusing on the unearned nature of it. In 1 Peter, the author – who is probably not truly the Apostle Peter, but rather a follower of his, someone who knew Peter personally - is giving advice to various churches and believers. This “letter” is really a circular sermon meant to encourage people who are being persecuted and to give them advice on how to live in an increasingly alien, corrupt culture. The author advises:

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*God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

He tells them that believers are servants, that we are to use our gifts from God to act as God's hand in this world. When he refers to gifts that we have received from God, he uses the word *charismata*, not *doreai*, the plural of *dorea*. He is focusing on an important fact, that these gifts aren't just free - they come from the gracious heart of God. They are powerful spiritual gifts, and this is where we get our word "charisma". These gifts allow us to touch other people in deeply spiritual ways. What are these gifts? Some of them are specialized things, like being able to be an oracle and inspire others to find God. But one great *charisma* is Jesus. Another is the Holy Spirit within us.

Recently, Wendy and I were in Egypt. At one point, we were visiting a shop in the ancient capital Luxor (or Thebes). The shop sold vases. I spoke with a man who was 75 years old. He was wearing an old white robe, called a *dishdasha*, and a turban. He said that he had learned his trade of hand carving pots out of single blocks of alabaster from his father, who had learned the trade from his father, etc., etc., back more generations than he knew. Alabaster is a soft, translucent stone, and after we bought a truly stunning vase from the man he worked for, I asked this older craftsman if I could take his picture. He said yes, and he let me take his

portrait. Then, when I gave him a U.S. 5-dollar bill, he gave me a gentle smile and he kissed my cheek. It was a lot of money to him, clearly. He had a soft expression on his face, one that spoke of many years of sitting on the ground in a simple shop, making vase after vase after vase. Looking into his eyes was like looking deeply back into the generations of men in his family. But what I gave him was only a *dorea*. What he gave me was something from the depths of his soul. It didn't rank as *charisma*, but I'm trying to give you an idea of how these two words compare. It was nothing for me to give him \$5, but yes, it was a gift. I hadn't promised to pay him, and the norm in Egypt would have been to perhaps tip him perhaps 5 Egyptian pounds – about 16 U.S. cents. In comparison, though, this man could have just pocketed the money. But he wanted to offer me a thanks that came from deep within his heart. It was a gift that was deeply touching. I'll never forget it.

Here is the beginning of Chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians:

**12** *Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. <sup>2</sup>You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.*

Let's start with the second to last verse of this passage, "<sup>3</sup> 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." Paul is telling these

new believers that the Holy Spirit indwells only those who believe. This is why the verse before this says that when they were pagans, before they became followers of Jesus, and they worshipped lifeless idols of wood and metal and stone, they were led astray – because pagans do not have the Holy Spirit within them. And the first verse of our quote from 1 Corinthians says that he wants them to be aware of their spiritual gifts. In other words, now that they believe, they have the Holy Spirit within them and are receiving great spiritual gifts. In verse 1, where we read spiritual gifts, the text only has the word “spiritual”, which is “*pneumatikōn*” in the original Greek. Paul is equating being spiritual with having received a great gift. In verse 4, where we read the word gifts, he is now using the word “*charismata*”. Paul is saying that when we worship God and not things made by people, the Holy Spirit comes upon us – and now we can be truly spiritual people.

When we were in Egypt, we visited several ancient pagan temples, ones that predated Christianity and long predated the Moslem invasion of the ancient land of the Pharaohs. These temples had intricate carvings on them, some depicting scenes of the ancient Egyptian world, some with hieroglyphics on them. Temple engravings always include many images of the Egyptian pagan gods. The Egyptians tended to decorate the entire surface of the ceilings, the structural columns, and the walls with engravings that were then painted colorfully. Most of the paint, but

not all, is gone now, with only the engravings remaining, for the most part. In those first, second, and third centuries after Jesus was born, Roman Emperors persecuted Christians. They were hunted down and killed. As it turns out, when the Romans took over much of North Africa, including Egypt, the several thousand-year run of the Pharaonic empire ended. The temples fell into disuse. Christians discovered them and used them as hiding places. They lived and worshipped in ancient Egyptian temples. The soot from their cooking and heating fires can be seen on the ceilings of these temples. The guide that showed Wendy and me through several of these temples kept repeating with great disgust that the Christians “defaced” the temples by hammering away the faces of the pagan gods. What he failed to mention was that the temples had been abandoned, and the Christians, like everyone else, had long forgotten how old the temples were. In truth, some of them were only a couple of hundred years old. At any extent, the Christians also added new carvings here and there, in the way of an occasional, small, simple cross.

These early Christians, in their determination to scratch out pagan icons, were motivated by a primary tenet of our faith: we’re not looking just for *dorea* gifts from God, we want *charisma* gifts. We do this by shunning worldly gods. The walls of those temples were covered with images that looked like humans because that was how ancient pagans saw their gods: as human-like creatures who

controlled various aspects of people's lives. They had hundreds of gods; they gave birth to each other and fought with each other. Seth was the god of violence. Osiris was in charge of death, and he himself was murdered and dismembered by his brother Seth. Isis was female and she gave succor to the dead. Re controlled the sun. Hathor embodied motherhood. Thoth was the god of writing. Amon was the god of air. The list goes on and on. The Christians who hid, lived, and worshipped in pagan temples saw a close relationship between the gods of ancient Egypt and the gods of their oppressors, the Romans. This is why they scratched out their stone faces. And in acknowledgement of there being only one God, they only occasionally chiseled small crosses on the walls of their hiding places. They weren't trying to cajole many gods into giving them the things they needed to live. The early Christians were thanking a single god for *charismata* that allowed them to serve God even under the most oppressive and dangerous of situations.

The word *charisma* or *charismata* derives directly from the Greek word *charis*, which means grace. There is a strong relationship between the gift of the Holy Spirit, a gift that is *charisma* because it lets us be truly and deeply spiritual, and God's gift of grace to us. They are all aspects of one thing. We have the Holy Spirit within us teaching us and guiding us in the ways of God when we must make important life decisions – and those decisions can come upon us quickly, and they

can come upon us in very subtle ways. We also have God's grace within us. With grace comes forgiveness, protection, and the unquestioned love of God for us. Grace pulls us toward God at all times, like a magnet drawn to a heavy, massive presence that cannot be ignored. Grace balances out the depravity of everyday human life. Along with the Holy Spirit, along with grace, we get other *charismata*, gifts that allow us to live as spiritual beings, not just animals struggling to survive. *Charismata* can also be translated also as an endowment. Just as a wealthy person might leave a vast sum of money so that a college can be funded indefinitely off the interest of the investment only, God gives us a series of incredible gifts that allow us to stay in a state of grace, with the Holy Spirit directing us, inspiring us for our entire lives. In fact, *charismata* never stop being bestowed upon us.

People often joke about re-gifting, or the practice of taking an ugly sweater that someone gave us last Christmas and giving it to someone else next Christmas. A *Charisma* is, in a positive sense, like that. We can pass it on, in a way. And unlike that red sweater with a giant snowman on it, we can give it to someone without losing it ourselves.

Here is 1 Corinthians, just a little bit later in Chapter 12:

*<sup>27</sup>Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. <sup>28</sup>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.*

The Greek word translated to gifts in this passage is *charismata*. Paul is telling the believers in Corinth that they are now part of the body of Christ, the Church. God has appointed Apostles, Prophets, and teachers, as well as those who can perform miracles. He has also given the *charismata* of healing, helping, administering, and speaking in various languages. Notice that he does not say that some people are bishops, others are pastors, others are elders, and others are lay servants. Paul uses these words that denote titles in the Church elsewhere in his letters, and he deliberately used different terms in this passage. This is because this passage focuses on the tasks that believers of all types and titles can perform, and it does not focus on their statuses or positions in the Church. God wants people to be his Apostles in that we are lifelong evangelists. Others of us are Prophets to whom God speaks – although we know of no prophets since the time of Jesus. Others teach, and he doesn't mean math and spelling: he is referring to teaching the faith, what we believe and why. Finally, there are those of us who are led by the Holy Spirit and inspired by God's grace to heal, help, and administer, and some of us translate or interpret for people who know differing languages or come from different cultures. Two of these gifts are meant in both a literal and spiritual fashion: we call upon God to heal those who are sick in body or corrupt spiritually,

and we help those who need directions or need guidance to find or renew their faith. The last is spiritual only: we administer not the public library, but the Church itself, organizing the collective body of God. While we do not literally give people *charismata*, we inspire others to believe and to accept *charismata* from God.

The lesson of the *charismata* is that they are at the heart of who we are as believers. The *charismata* given to us by God come with our faith, and they are what we use throughout our lives to serve God. We should live every day in thanks for the wonder of these gifts. They grow with us as we age. They never become stagnant. Society may dismiss people who are not wealthy or famous or in a position of power. Our earthly contributions may be dismissed by society at some point. But God plants the seed of the Holy Spirit within us, fills us with grace, and we are guided and inspired to use our *charismata* in ever more creative fashions throughout our lives. *Charismata* can be obvious gifts, like being skilled in languages or music, or they can be subtle gifts, like being able to convey a sense of calm to those around you. *Charismata* are those gifts that help you bring people to God, gifts that help others see that a life love, forgiveness, and grace is a joyous life. *Charismata* will keep us relevant to the Church for our entire lives. With *Charismata*, the gifts of faith, the gifts of spirit, we will always find creative ways to represent God on this planet. Please pray with me.

*God, thank you for the charismata, the magnificent, glorious gifts given only to believers, and which allow us to serve you and the Church and the people of this world while we are living in this world. We look forward to walking in your Kingdom all through eternity, empowered by our charismata. Amen.*