

YOU ARE ENDOWED FOR GOD'S WORK!

Today's Text: Joel 2: 28-32

Extracts:

“And it shall come to pass afterward that *I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters will prophesy; your old men shall dream dreams; your young men shall see visions; and also on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days” [Joel 2: 28-29]*

In 1936, Adolph Hitler's Germany hosted the Olympic Games to showcase the superiority of the Aryan race over the rest of the world. However, in the 100 metres dash, that is normally used to determine the fastest man in the world, an African-American, Jesse Owens, beat the whole field and set a new world record in the event.

Over the years, that event has been dominated by black runners, mainly Americans. A number of questions come to mind. If speed is natural to the black race, how come that athletes from Africa (where the majority of black people live) have not significantly challenged Africans in the Diaspora in the 100 metres race? Does that not suggest that acquired skills can enhance natural talents?

We know that God has endowed each and everyone of us with natural talents mainly by inheritance through family, race, gender, etc. Yet, those talents blossom or remain buried, depending on what we do with them. That is where spiritual gifts come in. In today's lesson, God says that in the last days, He will pour out His Spirit on all flesh. Does 'all' mean every human being on earth? Does that mean that we are all endowed with spiritual gifts? Are the gifts of the Holy Spirit natural talents or acquired? How best can we use them to enhance our natural talents?

Those issues and more will be examined in today's lesson.

1. Background: God's Spirit on all flesh

The opening verse in today's lesson says, "And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh" [**Joel 2: 28a**]. Two key words should be noted: 'and' and 'afterward.' Both words suggest that something has to precede the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh. If we go back to earlier verses of that chapter, we can note the following:

- Repentance: God required Judah to turn to Him with *all their hearts*, "with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning," that they should rend their hearts, not their garments. In return, God promised to be "gracious and merciful" [**vv. 12-13**], and "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" [**v. 32**]. That suggests that a *necessary condition* for God to pour His Spirit on humans is genuine repentance. This is well brought out in Peter's first sermon after the Holy Spirit had fallen on the disciples on Pentecost Sunday. Interestingly, Peter made the point that the experience that he and his colleagues had just had was in fulfillment of Joel's prophecy [**Acts 2: 16-21**]. At the end of the sermon, the listeners "were cut to their heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'What shall we do?'" Peter replied, "Repent, and let everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Notably, he added, "For the promise is to you and to your children, *and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call*" [**vv. 37-39**]. So, 'all' applies only to those who genuinely confess their sins and give their lives to Christ. Therefore, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are only given to believers.
- Restoration and refreshing: Following their repentance, God promised to restore to Judah what the locusts had devoured [**Joel 2: 25**] and His people would know that their God is in their midst and His "people shall *never* be put to shame" [**v. 27**]. In other words, repentance brings God's restoration and refreshing to the believer. Jesus told His disciples, just before His ascension into heaven, "These signs will follow *those who believe*: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover" [**Mk 16: 16-18**]. That suggests that God's purpose for giving believers His Spirit is to let the world know that He alone is God and "there is no other" [**Joel 2: 27**].

Provided we meet those conditions, God has promised to pour out His Spirit on us. In today's bible text, the following spiritual gifts were highlighted:

a) *Prophecy*

God said, "Your sons and daughters shall prophesy" [**Joel 2: 28**]. In prophecy, God gives humans foreknowledge of what He plans to do in the future or

reveals His secrets. For example, hundreds of years before His conception, God gave the prophet Isaiah a vivid picture of the birth of Jesus through a virgin [**Is. 7: 14**], His suffering and death on the cross [**Is. 53**], and His earthly government [**Is. 9: 6-7**]. In the words of Jesus, He came to earth to fulfil the Law of Moses [first 5 books of the Old Testament], the Prophets [from Isaiah to Malachi] and the Psalms which are all about Him [**Lk 24: 44**]. Thus, God has used prophecy to convey promises or warnings because “surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets” [**Amos 3: 7**].

b) *Dreams and Visions*

God promised us, “Your old men shall dream dreams; your young men shall see visions” [**Joel 2: 28**]. We dream when we are asleep and see visions when we are awake. For example, it was through dreams that God told Joseph about his wife, Mary’s divine conception [**Matt. 1: 19-25**], and to take the new-born Jesus to Egypt to escape from Herod’s massacre of infants under two years of age [**Matt. 2: 10-16**]. In the Old Testament, Joseph is the best known dreamer in that he had the gift to dream [**Gen. 37: 5**] and to interpret dreams [**Gen. 41: 25-36**].

We see visions while we are awake. For example, while he was on exile in the island of Patmos, Jesus appeared to the apostle John in a vision to give him the word of God recorded in the book of Revelation [**Rev. 1: 1-2**]. During the reign of Uzziah, king of Judah, Isaiah “saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple” [**Is. 6: 1**].

Interestingly, God said that old men (and women, of course) will dream dreams and the young men (and women) will see visions. One possible explanation for this is that older people tend to sleep more than the younger people but God may need to speak to both of them. So, for the older ones, He reaches them in their sleep through dreams. The younger people who are restless and hustling for success in life hardly sleep. So, God reaches them through visions!

In addition to the spiritual gift of prophecy, there are many other gifts mentioned in Scriptures, such as: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, discernment, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues [**1 Cor. 12: 8-10**]. As the word of God emphasizes, “but one and the same Spirit works all these (gifts), distributing to each one individually *as He wills*” [v. 11]. God manifests His gifts in believers “for the profit of all” [v. 7], “for the equipping of the saints, for the work of ministry, [and] for the edifying of the body of Christ [**Eph. 4: 12**] so that it can evangelize the whole world before Christ’s return [**Matt. 28: 17-20**].

If the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given only to believers, how then do we explain the existence of false prophets [**Matt. 7: 15**], sorcerers and diviners who are

capable of receiving messages from the spiritual realm? To answer that question, we need to relate Spiritual gifts to our natural talents.

2. Endowments come from Natural Talents and Spiritual Gifts combined

We have seen from the forgoing discussion that a spiritual gift “is simply a divine endowment of a special ability for service upon a member of the body of Christ.”¹ Natural talents, on the other hand, are what we have inherited by virtue of our birth. However, since we are all descended from Adam who was made in the image and likeness of God, then, natural talents are also from God. They are both endowments from God. It takes the Spirit of God to turn our natural talents into vessels for doing God’s work. For example, after God had described to Moses how to build the tabernacle of meeting and make the holy vessels and priestly garments to be used there, He chose two artisans by name, Bezalel and Aholiab and told Moses, “I have put *wisdom in the hearts* of all the artisans, *that they may make all that I have commanded you*” [Ex. 31: 1-6].

However, we need to also recognize that false prophets and fortune-tellers exist who do not derive their inspiration from God but from Satan (by way of divination). When the devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he brought the Lord to a high mountain and “showed Him all the kingdoms of the world *in a moment of time*” [Lk 4: 5]. That was a vision; Satan used a vision to show Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. Lucifer poses as an angel of light and he can counterfeit dreams and visions to deceive people that do not know God in truth and in spirit! For example, the slave girl that pestered Paul and Silas at Philippi was “possessed with the spirit of divination” and she used fortune-telling to make money for her masters [Acts 16: 16-17].

In summary, *spiritual gifts operate in the heart and natural talents in the flesh, mainly mind*. So, we need spiritual gifts to transform our minds and make them subject to God’s use [cf Rom. 12: 2]. A combination of our spiritual gifts and natural talents determine our endowments. *The quality of our endowments depends on the extent to which we use them for God’s service.*

How do we use often our endowments? Here are some common ways, among so many others:

a) *Some endowments can be misdirected*

Some people have been richly endowed but they do not use such talents to glorify God. For example, some gifted singers make albums and videos based on lewd lyrics that encourage misconduct and violence. Some gifted physicians have used their talents to assist people to die or to procure abortions. Some talented comedians crack vulgar jokes. Some Oscar-quality

¹ William McRae, *Dynamic of Spiritual Gifts*, The Zondervan Corporation; 1976, used with permission in “Spiritual Gift or Talent?” Issue #90 Nov. – Dec. 1995, www.navpress.com/EPubs/1/1.90.2.1.html

actors and actresses feature mainly in pornographic movies that corrupt young minds. None of such things can glorify God or advance His purposes.

Take the case of Aaron who had been Moses' mouthpiece during the spiritual battles with the Pharaoh of Egypt to free the children of Israel from bondage [Ex. 7: 1]. After the people had left Egypt, God reserved the priesthood ministry for Aaron and his sons "for a perpetual statute" [Ex. 29: 9]. But, when Moses delayed his return from Mount Sinai where he had gone to receive the Ten Commandments from God, the people approached Aaron to make them gods to go before them. Instead of resisting them, he gathered earrings from the people which he "fashioned ... with an engraving tool" into a moulded calf. He told the people, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you of the land of Egypt" [Ex. 32: 1-4]! That was a clear misdirected use of his endowments.

Look at your congregation and see how many members are misdirecting their endowments. Instead of joining the church choir, a talented singer wants to pastor a congregation because s (he) perceives that that is more fashionable. A young person that God has given much wealth neither pays tithes nor supports church work needing urgent funding Brilliant accountants and bankers are using their talents to cook corporate or church books to cover up fraudulent practices. Some who are naturally endowed in inter-personal relations are sowing discord among the brethren for their political or other earthly ambitions. Enormous talents are being thus misdirected..

b) *Some endowments can be wasted*

There are some God-fearing people who have received abundant gifts from the Holy Spirit. Sooner than later, pride or pecuniary gains take them away from the presence of God and His purposes, leading them to waste their endowments.

For example, "God gave Solomon wisdom and exceedingly great understanding and largeness of heart like the sand of the seashore" [1 Kgs 4: 29]. With such a heart, he wrote 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs [v. 32], a fraction of which can be found today in the books of **Proverbs**, **Ecclesiastes** and **Song of Solomon**. Monarchs from all over the world came to Jerusalem to learn from Solomon's wisdom [v. 34]. Of course, we cannot forget that he built the first temple [1 Kgs 6]. Later, wealth and his appetite for women soon took him away from focusing his endowments on God's service. He married a thousand wives and concubines, most of whom worshipped idols [1 Kgs 11: 1-3]. He fell out of favour with God and after his death, his prosperous kingdom was split into two with the much smaller part, Judah, going to his son, Rehoboam [1 Kgs 11 and 12]. It is so easy to waste rich endowments when we fall to seducing spirits within and outside the church.

c) *Some endowments are fully surrendered to God*

As we saw in the case of the artisans that built the tabernacle for Moses, God can infuse our hearts with His Spirit in such a way that we are able to use our natural talents to glorify Him and Him only. We no longer live apart from God because Christ who first died for us now lives in us [Gal. 2: 20]. Our teaching skills are now used to teach God's word. Our melodious voices bring repentance to wayward souls and reverence to worship. Our wealth funds God's work and our hearts touch the needy.

Take the case of Peter. He used to be such a skilful and committed fisherman that he could toil at sea all night without catching any fish without being discouraged. Then, he met Jesus and let Him use his idle boat when the Lord wanted to preach to the multitudes. At the end of the session, He asked Peter to launch out into the deep and to let down his nets for a catch. He did so and caught multiple fish that overfilled the two boats of his small enterprise that he ran in partnership with James and John! Peter fell at Christ's feet and admitted his sinful nature. Jesus assured him that from then on he would be catching men instead of fish. Peter forsook everything and followed Jesus [Lk 5: 1-10]. On Pentecost Sunday, the Holy Spirit fell on Peter and the other disciples. There was a large gathering of foreigners in Jerusalem on that day and he preached Christ to them. The fisherman did not use fishing hooks but his newly acquired spiritual gifts. This time around, his 'hook' caught three thousand souls that gave their lives to Christ [Acts 2: 1-40], more than the fish that he ever caught as a fisherman! That is the product of surrendered endowments.

3. Conclusion: God has need for your endowments!

The harvest is ripe but the labourers are few. God is looking for apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers [Eph. 4: 11] to take the Good News to all nooks and corners of the world. We need to see demonstrations of miracles, gifts of healings, helps, administrations and varieties of tongues in the body of Christ [1 Cor. 12: 28] for believers to know that Christ is still with us "even to the end of the age" [Matt. 28: 20].

So, why are you sitting on the fence? What are you doing for God with the enormous talents that He has given you? Why do you come to church only to take but never to give? Why do you clamour to speak in tongues or prophesy when your sinful life style turns off those around you at home, work or church? What would you tell Christ you are doing or have done if He were to show up *right now*?

It is time to start moving!