

July 29, 2018 “How God uses us”

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We went to Shuyokai on a 49 seat bus this year. We had 48 people on the ride back, and it was a great joy for us to almost completely fill the seats. By the way, is there anyone who owns a bus as a passenger vehicle?

As far as I know, I don't know anyone who drives a bus to church, and I haven't heard of anyone who drives a bus to go shopping.

The manufacturer of the charter bus manufactures the bus for 49 passengers. The bus was designed also with a restroom so that the passengers can travel comfortably.

Then how about the cars we drive? Let's say for example the Toyota Corolla, it fits only 5 people but is easy to drive, fuel efficient, and can easily maneuver through town.

That is why we do not choose to drive the bus as our daily automobile. The charter bus and Corolla obviously vary in size, shape, and function. That is because these vehicles were made differently for different uses. They were designed and manufactured with different plans and are also marketed and sold in different ways as well.

The reason why I am talking about this is because like buses and cars, we are also created for a purpose, and are on this earth to make a unique contribution.

Much like a bus and car have different purposes, we also each have different purposes. It is not that one is better than the other but we all have a unique purpose. Our personalities, talents, flaws, skills, and weaknesses are what make us different from each other.

God intends to make change in this world through each one of us and our differences. And that change is to show God's glory, through you, on this earth.

July 29, 2018 “How God uses us”

Hearing this we may think, “Me bringing change to this world?”. “I would have never even dreamed that”. “I have no talent, I’m too old, I’m too young, I’m weak...”. To these doubts, it is written in the bible that we are all given life to reveal the glory of God. How then can we bring glory to God in our lives? This morning would like to talk about three things on this topic.

By your gifts

Two weeks ago, I spoke about how God has gifted us to change the world. This is obvious, but an important thing to remember is that a gift is something that is given to us.

No matter how much we deny or refrain from accepting it, the bible says that we all have accepted gifts from God. In the U.S., a very talented child is called a “gifted child”. I think it is a great phrase. Gifted child, in other words means that whether it be mathematics, or an ability to draw, that talent is something that has been given. If we are given something, that means there is a giver, and in this case it points to a being beyond us, which is God.

Concerning gifts, Paul writes this in Romans 12:6-8.

⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully (Romans 12:6-8)

Here, Paul writes about different gifts people are given. Those who teach, those who serve, those who encourage, and those who give.

This is not a new concept, but also something that is written in Exodus 31:1-5.

Then the LORD said to Moses, ²“See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, ³and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills— ⁴to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, ⁵to

cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts (Exodus 31:1-5) .

And in Deuteronomy 8:18, concerning gifts, it says this.

¹⁸ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today (Deuteronomy 8:18).

Here it says, "for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth". In contemporary terms "the ability to produce wealth" may be talking about success in business. In this verse, it talks about how even succeeding financially and massing wealth is a gift.

There is one thing in the United States that is completely unrivaled by other countries. That is the amount of donations in this country. There is an estimated 250 billion dollars that are donated to various organizations every year. Compared to this amount, Japan's total donation is 5 billion dollars every year. This makes the United States' donation sum 50 times more than Japan. There are helpful things in this country like tax deductions on donations, but even then, this country's amount of donations is unmatched. Especially things like university donations, that are a big part of a school's funding.

The donation sum in the US is explained by a cultural background of viewing profits gained through gifted abilities as something that should be given back to society.

And that is what the Bible talks about. Whenever the topic of gifts is discussed in the Bible, it is almost always followed by the fact that these gifts should be used for others. And gifts are not limited to what I just spoke about, but every gift given by God should be used for God. Using our gifts for God equals using our gifts for each other.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, Paul writes,

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.⁶ There are

different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

In 1 Peter 4:10, it says,

¹⁰ Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms (1 Peter 4:10)

These two verses are telling that we should steward and use our gifts for the common good.

And like the parable of the talents, if we use the gifts God has given us, then he will give us more, through which we are able to use more abundantly for God.

By your personality

The second thing is using our personality. We as individual beings, each have unique characteristics that define us.

We do not understand how unique our existence is. In our bodies are 10 to the 24th power of gene combinations. 10 to the second power is 10 times 10, which is 100. 10 to the third power is 10 times 10 times 10 which is 1000. To get 10 to the 24th power, 10 is multiplied 24 billion times. We cannot even fathom this number.

If we replaced every zero with a centimeter, the sum total is 23,680 kilometers or 14,800 miles. This is three times the distance between Los Angeles and New York. This number shows that there is no one like us on this earth. Not in the past, not in the future, there will never be anyone born who is exactly like us.

If you look around this church, there are various kinds of people. There are quiet people, there are people always moving about, there are people who are logical and people who are emotional. There are people who love talking in front of many people, and people who would never want to do that. We are all different.

July 29, 2018 “How God uses us”

The Bible provides many examples of how God uses different kinds of people. Peter was an optimist, Paul was very passionate, Luke was composed, Joseph was a deep thinker, Jacob was strategist, Jeremiah was delicate, Martha and Mary were sisters but had much different personalities. These people all used their unique characteristics to serve God, and God used these.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John who wrote the gospels are all different people. They all wrote about the same incidents of Jesus but each account is marked by the author’s unique style. And these differences make each gospel account stand out. This is shown in authors outside of the gospel like Peter, James, and Paul as well. Their differences make the Bible to be a multidimensional narrative that highlight God’s characteristics.

Characteristics and gifts are distinguishable. Gifts are things given by God, and if we refine these gifts it becomes our characteristic. God uses our characteristics to reveal his glory.

By your experience

The third thing is to make use of our experiences. We all experience different things in our lives. A husband has different experiences than his spouse, a parent than a child, and a sister than her brother. We each have different unique experiences. And these experiences shape us.

There are people who have climbed all of the top 10 highest mountains on earth. There are also people like me, who have not climbed Mt. Fuji even though they are Japanese. There are people who have traveled to 80 countries. There are also people who have never left their hometown. We all have varying experiences.

And we are able to use our unique experiences to our advantage. In 2 Corinthians 1:4-5, Paul writes,

⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵ For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ (2 Corinthians 1:4-5).

After Paul explains how we gain the ability to comfort through experiences, he does exactly this in the next verses.

⁸We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. ⁹Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. ¹⁰He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, ¹¹as you help us by your prayers. (2 Corinthians 1:8-10)

Here Paul writes about the troubles he has experienced, and at the same time he writes about God who saved him in his trouble, and gave comfort and hope to the Corinthians. In this way Paul's experience of hardship was used by God.

We cannot forget Jesus's words to Peter in Luke 22:32,

³²But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers (Luke 22:32).

Jesus knew what would happen to Peter afterwards. Peter said,

"Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." (Luke 22:33)

However, right after, Peter denies that he was a disciple of Jesus three times for the sake of his own safety. He betrays Jesus.

Knowing that Peter would fall into this setback of guilt and self-hate, Jesus says, "I have prayed for you, and when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers". Jesus knew that Peter's experience would be used to help him. And that experience gave great power to Peter.

Our experiences become power to encourage and comfort others. The source of this ability is often an experience that is at first painful and sorrowful. But if our eyes are open to how God uses our experiences, we are able to see hope even in the painful times.

July 29, 2018 “How God uses us”

There was a teacher named Yutaka Yoneda who was my mother’s mentor. This teacher held big responsibilities as a professor at Tokyo Biblical Seminary and was a pastor of Nishiochiai church in Shinjuku, Tokyo.

One day, a pastor’s child who was still an infant, past away. None of his peers were able to comfort him. But Mr. Yoneda placing his hand on the pastor’s shoulder was enough to comfort and encourage him.

Sometimes I talk about Miura Fujimaki, a pastor who was my mentor. He taught at Tokyo Biblical Seminary and was also once the chancellor as well. His life was unique. According to his story, he lived a hikikomori lifestyle (someone who lives in isolation and confinement at home), and also committed domestic violence in his youth, much before these things were common in Japan.

He struggled through many worries and was expelled from 17 schools. He would get into fights with his peers and teachers and be expelled from schools only a couple days after enrolling. After a while, there were no more schools he could enroll in and after a while he was able to enroll in a Chinese school in Yokohama. However, it was a middle school, and at age 19, he sat in a classroom amongst children who just graduated elementary school.

He hated school and hated people. But he met Jesus Christ, who healed his uncontrolled past. And his life changed. He said, “I used to hate school and studying, but I began to love it. And everyone I met started to seem like good people”. And he eventually would become a director of a seminary.

In the present, this teacher has a doctorate in philosophy and divinity, and can speak 10 languages fluently. I have seen him do Chinese translation using the Chinese he learned at the Chinese middle school. We would call his experiences setbacks, but these experiences were what shaped him into who he is. His testament of God’s grace was more powerful than anyone else.

Our experiences are all different. One person cannot encourage and comfort everyone. But your experiences can encourage someone next to

July 29, 2018 "How God uses us"

you. By experiencing an event, God gives us the power to encourage many people.

Recently I began to think about how we experience difference things in life. There are fun experiences and experiences of trials. The more we experience, the more we are able to relate to and comfort others.

And when I have experienced many things, I can use that experience to lift people up, to comfort people, and to encourage people. When I think about these opportunities, my experiences are not meaningless or in vain.

Today I talked about gifts, characteristics, and experiences. I have been taught many things, have been positively impacted, and have seen God's glory revealed through many people I have been able to meet. But these people are ordinary and are not the kind of people to be interviewed on TV or written about in a magazine. I am taught many things, given hope, and see God's glory through the daily words and actions of these people. And this continues even now.

God uses through gifts given to us. God also uses our characteristics that are formed through these gifts. Finally, God uses our experiences in ways unimaginable to us, and changes these things into good. Let us pray.

Translated by Kou Okura