

“Good Stewards of God’s Varied Grace” | 1 Peter 4:9-11

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Introduction

“Show hospitality to one another *without grumbling*.” That last part, “without grumbling” got my attention this week. Why would Peter need to include that?

I did some searching this week and found that somewhere between 20-40% of Americans consider themselves to have “the gift” of hospitality. They *enjoy* hosting people at their homes and stuff like that. That means that the remaining 60 to potentially *as much as 80%* of the population does *not* consider themselves to have this gift.

I could go either way. My biggest issue is that when you have people over you’re supposed to tidy up, and I hate that. My wife bought a very confusing German vacuum. I don’t understand how it works. I don’t have the spiritual gift of vacuums.

Whenever we have people over my philosophy is: just leave everything as it is. Clean nothing. Let the guests see how bad we really are. I call it ‘authentic hospitality.’ Leave the Legos on the floor, they add character. And whatever you do, don’t look under the couch cushions because I can tell you right now that there is a significant amount of Cinnamon Toast Crunch under there. I say leave it. It’s seasoning for the sofa. Sadly, my wife feels differently.

Whether or not you feel you have the gift of hospitality (and many of you here do, and it is beautifully evident), as it turns out, in this passage at least, hospitality itself is *not* the gift that Peter refers to. I guess that’s good news for the 80% of us who prefer to leave the cereal in our sofas. Rather, as Peter tells us in verse 10, the gift that all believers receive is “*God’s varied grace*.”

We’re not the gift. Our skills are not the gift. God’s *grace* is the gift. His grace, his unearned free favor, his saving power that unites us to life in Christ. This grace is the gift that Peter speaks of in this passage. This “varied grace,” as the Bible says, assists us to develop proficiency in a variety of skills that we can use for God’s

glory and for the world's benefit. And through these encounters, people experience Jesus through us.

So often, when we think about and teach about spiritual gifts we focus on ourselves. We might ask, what are my spiritual gifts? Or, how can I grow in my gifts? These are not bad questions at all. And discernment is at the heart of Christian discipleship. But it is striking how God-centered this passage in Peter is today.

In a span of three verses we learn that God's grace is the gift. God's word is the script that guides the use of the gift. God's power is the source propelling the gift. And that God's glory is the purpose of gift as verse 11 says, "through Jesus Christ." In a world in which it's easy to take a topic that's really about God and make it about us, it's refreshing to be reminded that, as great as our gifts can be, we're not God's gift to the world; Jesus is.

As we work through the passage, we'll ask two questions of 1 Peter 4 today,

- How can we be good stewards of God's varied grace?
- How do we avoid obsessing over our gifts rather than focusing on the glory and greatness of the giver?

I. How can we be hospitable stewards of God's varied grace? (v. 9-10)

When Peter exhorts his readers to "show hospitality," he is exhorting *all Christians*, whether or not they reckon that hospitality is one of their personal "spiritual gifts." The rest of the New Testament speaks about hospitality this way too.

The Book of Romans exhorts *all Christians* to "show hospitality" to the people of God, the Church. And, in the Book of Hebrews, the author expands the scope of hospitality, instructing *all Christians* to "show hospitality" even "to strangers."

When Peter calls us to be stewards of God's varied, hospitable grace, the word "stewards" refers to being "administrators" or "developers" of grace. In the original language, the word was used to refer to people who "managed a household or estate."

Peter welcomes us to “manage,” to “develop” our passion and proficiency in the skills by the power of God’s varied grace for God’s purposes and glory.

Now, I’ve seen two dangers associated with this idea. Either we can become overly passive in the whole affair: ‘It’s all God’s gift, therefore I play no part, I have no agency and I don’t have to work to develop the varied grace of God into a proficient skill.’

Or, on the other hand, God’s grace just becomes a sort of ‘icing on the cake’ of my own effort. The reason that I’m a good guitarist, or lawyer, or teacher, or athlete is because I earned it. I worked hard to develop expertise and mastery in the skill, a feat that can be accomplished with or without the grace of God.

I’ll give some examples. In the first instance of human passivity in the light of divine grace, I recall having university students who exhibited no effort in their studies anchoring their laziness in an overblown sense of God’s grace. They’d show up to exams having not studied or done the readings and say “God’s got this.” But God didn’t; because they’d bomb the theology exam. It got to the point when I was lecturing at the University of St. Andrews, that I’d start my classes out by praying like this:

“Dear gracious Lord. Some here have studied diligently, assist them to recall everything they have so mightily worked to master. Others, have not, and I pray that they would utterly fail in accordance with their mediocre efforts. Amen. You may begin the exam.”

Another student would arrive each week for a worship ensemble I led having never practiced. She’d rock up for rehearsals doing the Mariah Carey ear thing. Only she was completely out of tune.

Neglecting our agency in developing God’s varied grace is a form of spiritual laziness. The gospel doesn’t invite us to be spiritual freeloaders. Stewarding grace means cooperating with God’s power in accordance with God’s word to accomplish God’s saving purposes. It is *inhospitable* to approach God’s varied grace with an attitude of presumption.

On the other hand, treating God’s grace as an insignificant ornament to our self-achieved excellence runs the risk of inviting an obsession over our own spiritual gifts at the expense of the greatness and glory of the giver. Such is the essence of

all forms of idolatry. If we stop at the skill we stop short of the one who gives us the strength to hone the skill. If we stop at the gift; we stop short of the glory of the giver. We start to stare at our own skills. We become enamored with them, and ultimately with ourselves. It's the ultimate form of spiritual narcissism.

When we do this, we're tempted to collapse our worth and identity into our own proficiencies and skills.

Developing expertise in a skill is not arrogant, it's glorious and it brings glory to God . . . if that is our intention. But if we stare at the gift, we become proud, boastful, "puffed up with conceit" as the Bible says. To adopt language used by Paul and Jesus elsewhere, our skills are meant to function as **ligaments** rather than **leaven**.

Ligaments nourish and knit the body of Christ together, as it says in Colossians. Ligaments connect us to the life of God leading to our mutual growth in Christ (Col. 2:19). They function to build Christ's body; not our own brand. Leaven, like "the leaven of the Pharisees" in Matthew 16:11-12) puffs up the whole loaf with the heaviness and haughtiness of human pride, and it leaves us spiritually lethargic and self-absorbed. Leaven disrupts unity and hinders spiritual health and maturity.

The godly stewardship of hospitable skill should be neither presumptuous or prideful. It sees the primary of goal of the development of all excellence as service to others, rooted in and reliant on God's power and God's word, as Peter says in verses 10 and 11.

Are you functioning as a ligament or a leaven? Do you feel such a sense of connection to your own skills and gifts that if your gift were taken away in this season, you would no longer be you, because you are your gift?

II. How do we avoid worshiping the gift rather than glorifying the giver? (vv.10-11)

It's important to remember, as we think of stewarding and honing our spiritual gifts and skills in service to God and others, that by the standards of the world, even the most successful of us will be forgotten. This is true no matter how

proficient we become at our gifts. That's why it is so crucial that we do not obsess over the gift rather than glory of the giver.

Even the greatest figures of antiquity ended up as, at best, piecemeal partially-destroyed statues buried under the ruins of the faded, former glory of Rome. Artifacts for archaeologists to uncover, dust off, and display. Trophies of a glory that once was but long ago faded away, never to return.

Of course, most people won't even end up in a museum; they'll just fade away quietly. Gone without a trace, as if they never even existed. Such is the "glory" of the dust from which we came and the dust to which we return. Such is the "glory" of the gift when it stops short of glorifying the giver.

If you say to the average person 100 years from now, "hey, how about that John Frederick." You'll likely receive the response "John Frederick? Never heard of him." It's the same for all of us. Insert your name, and they'll say about you "I've never heard of him . . . I've never heard of her."

That's a sobering thought our culture, in which being influential and having a platform and a brand means *everything* to us.

Our culture grasps at its handfuls of dusty glory like an Air BnB host begging for a five-star rating as a way of staying viable, visible, and valuable. But the Christian is called to forsake the **"Air BnB Host" Hospitality** and to willingly embrace the **"I've Never Heard of You' Hospitality**.

The 'I've Never Heard of You' form of Hospitality intentionally operates eternally incognito. It follows the humble mantra of John the Baptist: "I must decrease, he must increase."

Think about the most memorable moments of your life. The people that have made the biggest impact. It's curious how often those times and people would seem so run of the mill and unremarkable according to worldly standards.

- I think of my Dad trying for years everyday after work to teach me to ride my bike.
- My camp counselor for our 5th grade class trip who mentored us and took us out on an owl viewing excursion at night where we saw zero owls but basked in the adventure of the outdoors.

- That the most memorable part of a recent vacation I took was not the thrilling rides of an amusement park, but sitting on an old rusty swinging bench with my daughter coloring drawings of donuts in a coloring book with magic markers, and watching my wife and daughter build a sandcastle from a distance while I tackled massive waves on the beach with my son.
- For many kids it will be the mentors and volunteers dressing up and playing at VBS.

So much of the spiritual good we'll get to do for others happens not in the spotlight when we're using our skill but in the unassuming, **seemingly unspectacular moments** of everyday life. It's not a highlighted hospitality; it's a humble hospitality— "I must decrease, he must increase."

Conclusion (The 'I've Never Heard of Him' Hospitality)

There are thousands of examples I could share, but I'll share just a one from our community here at the Falls Church Anglican. Back in September of 2022, a few months after I arrived back from Australia, there was an evening at Truro Church in Fairfax City. It was a packed house for an event where we heard from three candidates for the role of Bishop, which is the highest office in our region here in the Mid-Atlantic which in Anglicanism we call the 'diocese.' In the middle of the proceedings, I kept noticing my phone go off. I missed ten calls from my brother in a span of about four minutes. This is highly irregular for my brother. He and I are fairly close, but we rarely talk on the phone, and when we do it is very caveman-esque and brief.

I figured something was wrong, so I wiggled out of the pews and tried to sneak out the back of the sanctuary quietly. I sat down on a step and dialed my brother's number. It was a really peaceful evening. The glow of old-fashioned Fairfax City street lights giving off that historic, quaint feeling that the area evokes. My heart was full, but then my heart dropped.

My brother's trembling voice through the phone sounded undone. That's the night I had found from my brother that we had lost my dad. At that moment no

amount of skill. No amount of excellence could fix the situation. I couldn't preach my way out of it. I couldn't play my way out of it musically. I couldn't parse my way out of it using my skills in the biblical languages. I couldn't even theologize my way out of it, after having taught theology for a decade in seminaries.

After the call, all I could do was just sit there, head in my hands, openly weeping on the stairs of Truro Church for what seemed like 20 or 30 minutes. I saw random people pass, but surely, none of these people knew me. It's not like we were in Falls Church or even Arlington. These were all strangers, so I thought. I composed myself and went back in the church. I didn't know what else to do. I told no-one initially. I didn't know how to deal with such grief.

The next week at church after the 11am service a brother from the congregation that I barely knew quietly came up to me. He explained in a very caring, sensitive, non-invasive way that he had been at Truro that night taking his son to an event in the rec hall. He happened to pass by me and had seen me weeping, but did not want to intrude. He wanted me to know he was praying for me, and to let me know he was there for me if I needed anything. I told him then what happened. What he probably didn't know was that he was one of the first people in the congregation that I told about the loss of my dad. The **sincerity of his hospitable heart** opened a door for me to **healing**. He didn't know it, but his simple act of hospitable kindness brought the tender heart of Jesus directly to me.

And it wasn't through his **proficiency**; it was through **his presence**, empowered by God, like a ligament uniting me to God.

It's the kind of thing you would forget if it wasn't so eternally significant. When hospitable skills and hospitable service direct their attention to the glory of the giver, even the most everyday moment becomes an instance of unimaginable eternal significance.

The world will probably forget our names, but the saints whose spiritual legacies we shape by a life of humble hospitality never will. The world may say 'I've never heard of you'; but God has. We have. Heaven has. And the names of all the faithful who are alive in Christ are etched into eternal the pages of the Book of Life (Phil. 4:3; Rev. 21:27).

Discussion Questions

(1) Consider the ways God's varied grace has developed in your own life. How can your particular spiritual gifts and skills become ligaments that build others up, and how might they function as leaven to puff others up and slow their spiritual progress down?

(2) Think of an instance in your life of someone who made a big spiritual impact on you but whose name the world will likely forget because they don't have a "brand" or "platform." How can you actively steward the gift of God's varied grace so that you can intentionally live out of a 'I never heard of you' hospitality that embraces the humble mantra of John the Baptist "I must decrease; he must increase."

(3) Where are the areas in your life that you could be tempted to presume upon God's grace, and where you lean so heavily on 'it's all God' that you become passive, not cooperating with the call to steward and grow in the varied grace of God?

(4) Conversely, what are the areas where you would tend to view God as irrelevant to your proficiency and success at cultivating a skill, where grace is just 'icing on the cake' of your excellence?

(5) Consider committing to memory the Prayer of St. Francis, an ancient prayer found in the Book of Common Prayer.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is error, truth; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O divine Master, grant that I may seek not so much to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in

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pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

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