

Use Your Gifts to Serve

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)

Scripture: 1 Peter 4:7–11

Song: "I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me"

I always wanted to be an artist. In younger days, I longed to sketch a horse or capture a seacoast on canvas. I tried to learn how to draw, but it never worked. I simply don't have the talent. Instead, God gave me a gift for words. Communicating is not the gift I would have chosen, but it has served me well. In pulpit, in print, in classroom, and in storytelling, my knack for words has blessed my life. I trust, by God's good grace, my gift has blessed others as well.

I recall the day I wandered into the church nursery where one of our members was painting whimsical animals on the walls. When I admitted my lifelong desire to draw, she looked at me in surprise. She said, "I've always wished I were good with words." After sharing a chuckle, she went back to her animals, and I returned to my unfinished sermon.

Peter understood how important it was for the church to love and serve each other so that "in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ" (v. 11). We may pass our days coveting other gifts, or we may gratefully use what we have received. I know which choice pleases the heavenly gift-giver.

Father, help me focus on what I have instead of what I lack. However modest my gifts, may I use them to glorify You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

August 24–30. **Michael Brewer** lives in Kentucky spoiling granddaughters and growing milkweed for monarchs. His retirement ministry includes teaching, preaching, and pastoral care.

God Rewards Hospitality

“You have gone to all this trouble for us. Now what can be done for you?” (2 Kings 4:13)

Scripture: 2 Kings 4:8–17

Song: “All Are Welcome”

During a pastoral visit to a new family who had recently worshiped with us, the mother poured out her heart to me. Her pre-school daughter, Penny, had a rare genetic disorder. Keeping the child still during worship was nearly impossible. Nor could she be left with the kids in the nursery. Two other churches had asked the family to leave because of Penny’s behavior. Tearfully, the mother asked if we could make room for her daughter. It wasn’t always easy. Penny scrambled under pews. She climbed into the lap of the worship leader. Animal sounds often accompanied our most solemn prayers. Despite the challenges, we fell in love with this unique child. I had hoped our congregation would rise to the calling, and I was proud of them when they did just that.

In today’s passage, a Shunammite woman and her husband had made room for Elisha in their home and in their hearts. In gratitude, he asked to repay them—and he did (and then some), as the childless woman gave birth to a son “just as Elisha had told her” (v. 17).

It’s funny how generosity works. The more we gave to Penny and her family, the more we received from God. We experienced a renewed sense of the Holy Spirit among us. Our congregation blossomed in love and openness. The more room we made for Penny, the more room we made for Jesus.

Father, make me a welcoming presence today, accepting others as gladly as You have accepted me. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

A Capable, Entrepreneurial Woman

She is worth far more than rubies. (Proverbs 31:10)

Scripture: Proverbs 31:10–22

Song: “Faith of Our Mothers”

As I browsed the history of a hundred-year-old congregation, I discovered a story of faithful women. A ladies’ auxiliary had funded the steeple, and a women’s group installed the church kitchen. Young mothers led Bible school. Women baked pies to support youth groups. Women rolled bandages, assembled refugee kits, and established the choir. As in so many congregations, the history of this church was a tale of men making decisions—and women getting things done!

Jesus certainly respected women. He believed in teaching women, a controversial stance in that day. He conversed with women in public, another sign of respect. He told parables that honored their work. Well-to-do women helped finance His ministry. Women were the first witnesses of the resurrection, and Mary Magdalene the first messenger of the good news.

Proverbs 31 praises women of character and reminds us of what women are capable of accomplishing. My life has been profoundly enriched by strong women. Maybe you and I might reach out today to some of those women who have blessed us. Let’s give praise where praise is due.

Father, I thank You today for the strong, tender women who have nurtured, guided, and inspired me. Help me learn from their example. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Good and Faithful Servants

“You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things.” (Matthew 25:21)

Scripture: Matthew 25:14–23

Song: “O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee”

When I read the parable in today’s reading, I wonder whether the faithful servants were pleased with their rewards. Thanks to their diligence, the servants doubled the money entrusted to them by the master. They gladly report their accomplishments and await the master’s blessing. The master does indeed praise their efforts—and then he gives them more work to do! No bonus, no days off, no special privileges, just more work.

Yes, this is a reward! When we prove ourselves faithful, our Lord blesses us with even more opportunities to serve. We have the pleasure of using our gifts and the satisfaction of work well done. Better yet, we get the chance to serve a cause greater than ourselves. In a world that chases money, God points us toward a higher goal. Making a salary fills our bank account; making a difference in Jesus’ name fills our hearts.

Best of all, Jesus invites us to share His work, to live by His values, and to enter into His joy. God does not *need* our help, but He is pleased when we join our efforts to His purposes. How amazing that the creator of the universe leans down to us and says, “Let’s do this together!” I can imagine no greater reward than that.

Father, set me to any work as long as I can serve You. Even if I am small and weak, help me to be faithful. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

The Wicked Servant

“So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground.” (Matthew 25:25)

Scripture: Matthew 25:24–30

Song: “Standing on the Promises”

The servant in the finale of this parable played it safe. No risky investments! No safe investments, either—not even a savings account. Instead, this servant hid his master’s gold in the ground. Obviously, the man was afraid—afraid of loss, failure, making a mistake, afraid of disappointing the master. Sadly, his timid behavior earned the very condemnation he feared.

Discipleship demands risky behavior. Forgiving wrongs, trusting God, sharing our wealth, meeting anger with patience—such risks lead us out on a shaky limb. Love is the biggest risk of all, making us vulnerable to those who may not return our love. Taking risks is scary, but the alternative is hiding our gold (or our lives) in a hole to guarantee safety.

Not every risk will turn out well, but we are not alone on that trembling limb. God values our obedience more than our success. I wonder how the parable might have ended if the servant had lost the master’s money after trying his best to increase it. Perhaps the master would have berated the empty-handed servant, but it seems to me that Jesus was gentle with those who tried and failed. I’d like to believe the master would have handed the servant another bag of gold and said to him, “Try it again.”

Father, give me the faith to follow Jesus on risky paths. Win or lose, I want to lay my life on the line for You. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

The Righteous Provide for Others

“If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary. . . . I would have been unfaithful to God on high.” (Job 31:16, 28)

Scripture: Job 31:16–28

Song: “We Are One in the Spirit”

My wife’s father drove two hours a day to work as a full-time carpenter in the city. Evenings and weekends found him farming, raising both crops and animals. Farming is not a leisurely life. Long summer days mean long hours of labor. Cows and pigs must be tended regardless of the winter weather. Vacations were few and brief for this family.

Yet despite working two jobs, somehow my father-in-law found time to help others. If a nearby home burned, he helped rebuild. If a barn was under construction, he pitched in. When a neighbor was ill, he cut hay and fed animals. He was quick to share crops or cash with the needy. He reached out to the folks who lived “on the wrong side of the tracks,” forging friendship across the dividing lines.

Like Job, my father-in-law lived his faith as long as he lived. In many ways, his life embodied what biblical writers call *righteousness*. For his own part, he would have made light of the notion that he was a righteous man. Instead, he would have called himself a good neighbor. However, he understood that loving our neighbor is not just something we feel; it is something we do.

Father, give me the hands and the heart of a servant so that I may make a difference for Your sake. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Lydia Welcomes Guests

The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.
(Acts 16:14)

Scripture: Acts 16:11–15, 40

Song: “Somebody’s Knockin’ at Your Door”

When our older daughter was in high school, our home became the hangout for her friends. My wife and I were delighted but puzzled. Ours was a modest house compared to the homes of many of her peers. Other houses boasted large-screen TVs, pinball machines, and computer games. Ours offered a chilly basement, worn furniture, and ugly paneling—but lots of love.

How we loved those kids! We loved their shenanigans. We loved learning about their lives and watching them grow. We loved the laughter and awful music rising through the floorboards. I guess my daughter’s friends could tell how we felt about them, and that’s why they kept showing up. Those kids taught me that an open heart is as important as an open door.

That’s how it was with Lydia. A new disciple, she opened her home to host local believers and even those jailbirds, Paul and Silas. But her hospitality began with an open heart. When we welcome a guest to our home or a refugee family into our community or a visitor to our church, our actions matter—but so does the spirit behind them. An open heart makes the difference between mere obligation and genuine welcome.

Father, open my heart so that I may welcome the presence of each person who crosses my path today. Teach me to listen, to serve, and to welcome. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.