

Don't know if any of you have been watching BBC adaptation of Les Miserables. Absolutely brilliant – haunting, beautiful, captivating, best telly for years. Only real weakness of this adaptation is that it has secularised the story. The big issues of faith, grace and redemption which characterise Victor Hugo's original masterpiece have had their spiritual roots stripped away.

The hero of the story – Jean Valjean – is ultimately a model of grace – a man redeemed by the undeserved forgiveness and generosity of a bishop, and who thereafter dedicates his life to the service of others. It is a story of grace.

Grace is what Philip Yancey calls the 'last, best word of the English language' – when so many other words have subtly changed their meaning, grace retains its positive power. It is the heart of the Christian faith, it describes God's unconditional, unshakeable love for us. It encapsulates the saving work of Christ, declaring God's forgiveness and redemption over undeserving human beings like you and me.

And why do I start here today? We're meant to be looking at the gifts of the Spirit, right? Well, the answer lies in the original words themselves. The New Testament word for grace is 'charis' – it also means 'gift'. God's unconditional, undeserved gift of love to us. The word for spiritual gifts in the New Testament is 'charismata'. It's almost the same word – it literally means grace-gifts or 'graces'.

Just reflecting on this simple truth tells us 3 vitally important things:

First, any discussion of spiritual gifts has to be rooted in the ultimate gift of all – God's lavish grace expressed to us in Jesus Christ. Unless we are rooted in this ultimate grace, unless we are continually nourished by it, we'll never get a true handle on the spiritual gifts – or to use their proper name, grace-gifts.

Second, spiritual gifts or grace-gifts are reflections of God's deeper grace. They all point to Jesus and show his grace to others. Think of them: the gift of encouragement, the gift of miracles and healings, the gift of wisdom or faith or generosity or serving – do they not all describe Jesus himself? He is our model of wisdom, generosity and service, he has the power to work miracles and healings, he is the great encourager of people.

That's the difference between natural and spiritual gifts – spiritual gifts all point directly to Jesus, and all grow the kingdom. Natural gifts are important, of course they are – we need musicians and organisers and caterers and welcomers – but we need spiritual gifts to make us more like Jesus and therefore to make these natural gifts effective for God's kingdom.

Third, gifts are exactly that – gifts. They are given to us by God. Yes, we nurture them and use them as best we can – but let's remember that they are *gifts*, they are signs of his grace. We don't earn them or deserve them. Which is why some gifts appear to be used most effectively by the most unlikely people. God is God and he usually surprises us. He sees things in us which we might not see in ourselves.

So what's the application for us today?

Well this passage from 1 Corinthians makes the importance of this topic clear: **every church needs these gifts to be a church.** It's the way everyone gets to play a part: READ v7. It also allows us to offer our unique giftings, so that the church has an abundance of different gifts: READ v4-5. This is the way, Paul says, that we're meant to serve each other. We all have one or more of these gifts and we use them to bless other people. That's the other notable thing about these gifts – their purpose is, almost exclusively, for the benefit of others.

In short, it forms the basis of our unity and our diversity: READ v12-13. To be a real church, we need to be receiving and using these spiritual gifts – otherwise we're just a religious social club.

This is week 5 of our series on the Spirit, and thus far, the focus has been on *our* relationship to God – how we are formed in Christ as a community of the Spirit, whose identity as children of God is formed by the Spirit, who are led by the Spirit to know God better. But this is where the rubber hits the road – these grace-gifts are the practical outworking of a spiritual community leading spiritual lives. These gifts are still available to everyone today, they didn't die out with the 1st generation of Christians. I have spent many years in churches which nurture and practise these gifts and I have seen every single one of them exercised, including healings and miracles. They are absolutely for today as much as ever.

And all we have to do is ask for them. I plan to make this element of what it means to be a Christian much more open and obvious from now on, because every time I go back to these passages it is clear how fundamental these gifts are to what it means to be a church, indeed what it means for each of us to live our Christian lives. Which is another way of saying that there will be lots more opportunities to seek, receive and exercise these gifts.

And as an aside I want to stress that for me the word charismatic is not a cultural term. People misuse the word all the time to describe a city-centre church full of young people singing pop songs to Jesus. That is not my plan or intention – a truly charismatic church exercises the charismata, regardless of culture. I don't really care if it's done in silence, or singing old hymns on the organ or whatever – all that matters is that it's done. That is a true charismatic church.

But let's return to where I started – God's wonderful grace. As we breathe in the pure clear air of the kingdom, the atmosphere of his grace, we slowly find ourselves becoming people of grace and therefore people able to receive and nurture these grace-gifts. We love because he first loved us. We give, because we are continually filled with his wonderful grace. We are not Les Miserables – we are full of joy at his undeserved love.

And by his grace, God then pours out his Spirit and makes our love effective for his kingdom. He does it with our lives; he also does it with these gifts.

May that be true for us as a church, and may it be true in this season of our lives. Amen.