

Additional Gifts of the Holy Spirit
THE GIFT OF MERCY (Romans 12: 8)
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Have you ever been in the hospital and had some one visit you knowing full well what your reason for being hospitalized is and say “I would have been to see you sooner but I had to attend the funeral of a friend who died with the same sickness you have.” That definitely is not MERCY.

Or, have you been very sick and had visitors whom you felt obliged to stay awake and entertain when all you want to do is go to sleep? And they stay and talk, and talk, and talk. That also is not MERCY.

Unlike the ordinary work place, I think the Church is the most harmful place on earth, and clergy most susceptible to the abuse of this gift. I know, some clergy are equally guilty of abusing the gift. I have the battle scars of unmerciful parishioners who were I to have done the same thing to them that they did to me I would have been brought before the Bishop. Some of this is deliberate like a former senior warden and his wife in one church would stop at my office on their way to see the bishop and inform me. Their telling me was not out of respect but an added attempt to hurt because they were going to the Bishop against me. There are others who may not show the gift of mercy unknowingly. At one church I was pastor we had coffee hour following the Mass and mostly little groups consisting of people familiar with each other formed over coffee and fellowship. I had walked into one of these groups and my associate followed a few minutes later. One of the men chastised my associate in the presence of the other men. My associate said nothing, smiled, took the rebuke and walked off. The other men were stunned. Had my associate walked into the group and done the same toward a parishioner, all hell would have broken out.

Vestry meetings (called Administrative Board or Council in some denominations) can draw blood if you are not tough skinned. One night at a Vestry meeting I told the members we had three pages of tabled motions that needed to be cleared. Most of them had resulted because it was the easiest way to close a subject and move on. One Vestry member seemed to attract dissension on most every subject. I proposed that we try consensus government for six months that would necessitate listening to the person who might vote contrary to the majority rather than blatantly dismissing that person as if his opinion did not matter. Unless all were in agreement on an issue we would do nothing, but we would seek to reach an agreement before tabling the motion. Not realizing what they were getting into, they agreed to my proposal. They were a gracious group of people! When the man who seemed always to be negative next voted contrary to the rest of the members, we stopped and asked for explanation. He had his opportunity to explain his action. Sometimes he was right, and sometimes he was not, but the need to fight and argue in order to gain support ended, and the Vestry acted more like brothers showing mercy to each other. And, by the way, we got things accomplished in peace.

How do you know if you have the gift of mercy St Paul lists in his Roman epistle? If you put yourself in the place of the person to whom you are ministering, and weigh carefully what you are about to say or do, asking if you would appreciate the same directed toward you, then you have the gift of mercy. The person with the gift of mercy is one who has recognized his or her own sins, failures, and shortcomings, and takes into account “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. One of the cardinal rules in ministry is “hurt no one” and this is particularly important when a person is repentant, in need of forgiveness, in need of comforting, in need of love. Church should not be a place where your words are harsh in an attempt to justify your own behavior.

I have at times done counseling with a partner. Some situations warrant a female co-counselor. On one occasion a female counselor and I were working with a young lady who had so many problems you didn't know where to begin in helping. As I was seeking to listen to her and letting her know that whatever she told would not get from me a judgment, the co-counselor pounced on her demanding she “confess up”. I was embarrassed; I literally felt the pain of this counselee, and sadly, we didn't get very far in helping her. Several days later I happened to cross paths with her at the airport. My heart was breaking because here was a injured person who had come for healing and got only greater injury. The saying “sticks and stones may break my bones but words shall never hurt me” is totally incorrect, and anyone who has been on the receiving end of harsh critical words understand what I mean.

The Church should be a hospital for the injured souls seeking refuge from the world. It is the last place on earth where a hurting person should be inflicted with further hurt. People who do not have the gift of mercy should keep quiet, and realize that but by the grace of God go I.