

“Faith and Transformation”

Devotional Reading: Ezekiel 11:17-21

Background Scriptures: Romans 12:3-8

Romans 12:3–8 (NIV)

³ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. ⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if 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.

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To list several spiritual gifts.
- **Biblical Principle:** To understand that all spiritual gifts are important.
- **Daily Application:** To create a plan to use your gift(s) more effectively to humbly edify the church and to glorify God.

LESSON CONTEXT

Paul wrote the book of Romans in about A.D. 58, to Christians who were members of local churches in Rome probably toward the end of his third missionary journey. At that point, Paul had not yet been to Rome, but greatly wished to visit (Romans 1:11–15; 15:23–24). He would do so, but in chains as a prisoner, as Acts 27–28 records.

He made it to Rome by about A.D. 61 but remained under house arrest, unable to move about the city as he might have wished (Acts 28:16, 20, 30). Paul wrote his letter to the Roman church to introduce himself and his teaching prior to a personal visit there. The church likely had been established not long after the day of Pentecost, some three decades earlier (2:1). Some of the Jews who heard Peter’s sermon that day were from Rome (2:10), and it’s easy to imagine that they were the ones who started the church after returning home to Rome. There can be little doubt that the Roman church had heard of Paul (28:15) and looked forward to meeting him.

The book of Romans falls into two major sections. The first part, Romans 1–11, features some of the most doctrinally heavy thoughts in all of Scripture. A shift comes with Romans 12–16, which addresses how Christians should then live in light of the truth of those doctrines. The current lesson comes from this second section and describes our relationship to each other in terms of the members of a body. The basic idea is that each believer is a living part of Christ’s body, and each one has a spiritual function to perform. Each believer has a gift (or gifts) to be used for the building up of the body and the perfecting of the other members of the body. In short, we belong to each other, we minister to each other, and we need each other. What are the essentials for spiritual ministry and growth in the body of Christ? ...This is the subject of today’s lesson.

How to Think: Romans 12:3–5

Paul’s authority to speak in the way he does comes from the *grace* which is given unto him. That grace is the spiritual gift of apostleship (Romans 1:5; 15:15). From his position as an apostle Paul counsels, *every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought*. Paul is saying that each Christian should have a sober assessment of themselves, and underlying stating, should know what his or her spiritual gifts are and what ministry (or ministries) they are to have in the local church (*the faith God has distributed to each of you*).

It is not wrong for a Christian to recognize gifts in his own life and in the lives of others. What is wrong is the tendency to have a false evaluation of ourselves. Nothing causes more damage in a local church than a believer who overrates himself and tries to perform a ministry that he cannot do. (Sometimes the opposite is true, and people undervalue themselves. Both attitudes are wrong.)

The gifts that we have came because of God's grace. They must be accepted and exercised by faith. We were saved "by grace, through faith" (Eph. 2:8-9), and we must live and serve "by grace through faith." Since our gifts are from God, we cannot take the credit for them. All we can do is accept them and use them to honor His name. (See 1 Cor. 15:10 for Paul's personal testimony about gifts.)

1. How did the Apostle Paul say one should evaluate himself or herself? (Romans 12:3)

What Do You Think?

How do you determine whether you think too highly of yourself or underestimate yourself?

Digging Deeper

How will you use an accountability partner to help consider yourself with sober judgment?

Paul uses the analogy of the *body* to indicate that the life of humility must be lived in relationship to other believers. There are many members in the body of Christ, and each of us, regardless of how humble our station in life or how deficient in education or how expert we may be, has a gift from God to contribute to the whole body. In His sovereignty, God has just the proper place for each of us.

2. What analogy did Paul use to show how Christians should be as one? (Romans 12:4-5)

What Do You Think?

How do you discern your function within the body of Christ that is the church?

Digging Deeper

How do Ephesians 4:11-16 and 1 Peter 4:10-11 inform your process of discernment?

How to Serve: Romans 12:6-8

Since the members of the body of Christ have gifts which differ, each of us is to use his or her gift in the way they God intends. With the word *prophecy*, Paul begins a list of seven *different gifts*. Prophecy is the gift of inspired utterance (see 1 Corinthians 14). This activity is to be done *according to the grace given* or in harmony with that which has already been spoken by God.

When we see the word *prophecy*, we often think of predicting the future (as in Acts 11:28; 21:10-12). But that is not its main impulse in the New Testament era; rather, prophecy more often involves proclaiming information divinely revealed for the church's edification (compare 1 Corinthians 14:3, 24-25, 30). Moreover, the message of a prophet was evaluated by others having the same gift (14:29-32).

We pause here for a caution: as Paul begins his listing of spiritual gifts, it is tempting to jump in hastily and compile a list of such gifts according to this text and others. But to do so runs the risk of missing the bigger picture. That bigger picture is that spiritual gifts serve as an example of a church that is united in its diversity. Spiritual gifts are not given merely to bless the person receiving the gift, but to build up the church as a whole (Eph. 4:11-12). Most of all, these gifts are intended to be displays of love between believers (see 1 Cor. 13).

3. What is the believer to do with their gift? (Romans 12:6)

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to either (1) discern your spiritual gift or (2) discern how to use your gift for the church?

Digging Deeper

Who will you ask for insight and guidance in this regard?

The word *serving* here means ministering to others. Since the other gifts Paul names in our text involve specific functions, he was likely thinking of a specific gift of service that qualified a person to be in the office of deacon, which may cover various service in the local church on behalf of others (e.g. altar ministry, praying for and visiting the sick, etc.). See the ministry of the office of deacon (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8–13).

4. What is the gift of serving, and what types of service may be involved? (Romans 12:7a)

Teaching is the art of making the unchanging message of God understandable to the learner. Teaching is a gift of God; those who have that gift must not neglect to give attention to teaching because it involves communicating the truth of the gospel (see 2 Timothy 2:2; 3:10). The gift of teaching is also noted in 1 Corinthians 12:28–29 and Ephesians 4:11.

Teaching was critical for the first-century church, where many people were not formally educated. They learned from auditory instruction rather than reading. Therefore, it was and is a primary task of the eldership (1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17).

5. What is involved with the gift of teaching? (Romans 12:7b)

Unlike the teacher who appeals to the mind, the encourager takes his brother aside and appeals to his heart in order to console or encourage him. *Encouragement* is a specific and highly necessary ministry in the local church, especially in times like these. It is important that each Christian exercise his or her gift by faith. We may not see the result of our ministry, but the Lord sees it and He blesses!

6. What is the idea behind the gift of encouragement? (Romans 12:8a)

To *give* is to share with another or the church what one has. However, the term *generously* here means liberally (2 Cor. 8:20 and sometimes it means in singleness of heart or motive (9:7, 12–15). Essentially when we give, whatever we give, we ought to do with all of our heart.

This is an expectation of all believers (1 Corinthians 16:2). There are to be no ulterior motives for giving (contrast Acts 5:1–4).

7. What does it mean to give generously? (Romans 12:8b)

What Do You Think?

In what ways can a believer utilize the gift of giving without always focusing on financial giving?

Digging Deeper

Who can be the recipient of your nonfinancial giving?

The Greek word translated *lead* occurs eight times in the New Testament, always in Paul's letters. It is used for church leadership (1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17), family leadership or household management (3:4, 5, 12), and self-management (Titus 3:8, 14). The overall idea is that of "one who presides." To be such a person is to be in control in a godly sense.

To some people, God has given the ability to rule, or to administer the various functions of the church. Whatever gift we have must be dedicated to God and used for the good of the whole church.

8. Why is it necessary to *lead* with diligence? (Romans 12:8c)

To show *mercy* requires both action and a proper attitude. As such, showing mercy involves more than merely offering lip-service sympathy (compare 1 John 3:17–18) or forgiveness. This is the Christian gift of engaging in practical deeds of kindness. There is a place in the local church for those with this gift who go about their business in an unspectacular way doing a much-needed work and showing kindness and helpfulness to their fellow believers. We see the cheerfulness aspect of showing mercy as a feeling of being "more blessed to give than to receive," and to help than be helped.

9. What is required of those with the gift of mercy? (Romans 12:8d)

What Do You Think?

How might you demonstrate the gift of mercy in the upcoming week?

Digging Deeper

What might prevent believers from wanting to show mercy, even if they have the gift for doing so?

At this point, this list of spiritual gifts ends. But the very next verse (Romans 12:9) relates *love* to spiritual gifts in much the same way 1 Corinthians 12–14 does. Love is the touchstone for how any spiritual gift is used. Whatever our gifts or situations may be, let us try to employ ourselves humbly, diligently, cheerfully, and in simplicity; not seeking our own credit or profit, but the good of many, for this world and that which is to come.

Also note that each of these gifts is necessary for the proper function of the body of Christ. Since this is the case, one gift cannot be exalted over another and therefore *the transformed life exhibits humility* in its relationship to others in the local church.

CONCLUSION

All Gifts Matter

We understand that all spiritual gifts are important. But at the same time, we know that not all such gifts are equal (see 1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:1) and that not all believers are equally gifted (see Matthew 25:14–15).

As a result, our natural tendency is to pay more attention to the gifts that are more visible, more “out front” to the public. The highly visible preacher of the church usually gets more attention than the less visible custodian who cleans the church. But here’s where Paul’s illustration of body members working together (unity in diversity) comes in (see Romans 12:4–5): I don’t think you would want to go to dirty and smelly church any more than you would want to go to a church with a horrible preacher! The functions of one’s hands are much more varied, useful, and visible than are the functions of one’s elbow. But a nonfunctioning elbow will severely limit how the hand can function (compare 1 Corinthians 12:12–27).

Pride is a danger to those having the more visible gifts (see Proverbs 16:18). Also a danger is that those who have the less visible gifts won’t use them, perhaps figuratively “burying” them (Matthew 25:25). But just as no human body functions to its highest potential unless all of its parts work together, so also the church—the body of Christ—does not function at full potential until all of its members use their spiritual gifts. The cure (or preventative) for both pride of gifts and non-use of gifts is Luke 17:10: “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’”

Your Gift(s)?

A popular tool that churches and ministries have turned to since at least the 1980s is a spiritual-gifts assessment inventory. Most of the time, these indicate what an individual has already suspected concerning his or her spiritual gifts.

Occasionally, an inventory may indicate secondary or other gifts that one has not realized or that one does not have. These inventories are not perfect—they can even be misleading. The axiom *caveat emptor* (“let the buyer beware”) applies in more ways than one!

An assumption behind those inventories is that helping people identify what their giftings are will mean that those who have been thus enlightened will automatically start using those gifts. But that is not always so. People will need encouragement to use and otherwise develop their spiritual gifts. Sometimes, people need the wisdom and insight of others to help discern which giftings are present.

Another assumption is that such inventories are even needed for people to be able to identify their areas of spiritual giftedness. A more accurate indicator may be personal experience. What types of Christian service do your personal experiences tell you that you have been best at? Where have you fallen flat?

PRAYER

Father, You have called all of Your servants to serve. Help us to realize our gifts and give us the courage to develop and use them for Your glory. Help us to remember that no matter what our gifts are, we are all members of one body, and that no one is unimportant to Your church and to You. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Know your spiritual gifts and use them with humility.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "**Faith in the Power of God**" and reminds us of God's incomparable sustaining power and of His promise to provide strength to those who wait on Him. Study Isaiah 40:12-31.