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Romans 12:3-6a “The Believer’s Function in the Church”

Intro. Here in Romans 12 Paul begins to deal with the specifics of living the Christian life. In v.1 we see that God commands us to present our bodies as living sacrifices to Him. He also commands us not to be conformed to this present evil age, but to be transformed into the likeness of Christ by the renewing of our minds. These are some general, foundational commands concerning how we are to live our lives as Christians.

Now, in speaking of the specifics of living the Christian life, where does Paul begin? It is significant that Paul begins with our relationship to the local church. That is the most important area of your Christian life. Generally speaking, if you are not worshipping God and serving God in a local church, you are living in disobedience to these verses. Clearly, we are called to live out our faith in the context of a local church. Furthermore, when you connect verse two with what follows, it is clear that the renewal of your mind cannot properly take place without the help of fellow believers. We learn the truths of Scripture together (cf. 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 3:18). Others help us to see our blind spots and hold us accountable. Watching a worship service on TV or the Internet is no substitute for a vital connection to a local church. I know local churches have their faults, but that’s all the more reason for you to stay connected and be part of the solution to those faults.

As you become connected to a local church, it is not enough that you simply be a passive attendee. Just as every member or part of your body has a function, even so you need to be a member that ministers within the context of the local church. It has often been said that 20% of the members of the church do 80% of the ministry. Yet *every* member of this church should ask, “What does God want *me* to do to help this church to fulfill our mission?” Let’s answer that and other questions as we look at this passage together.

First of all, if we are going to be good and helpful members of the church, we need to:

I. UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

You are not going to carry out your role and function in the church if you do not understand what the church is. Well in vv. 4-5, Paul compares the Church to a human body.¹ The church is not just an organization; it is a living organism, just like a human body. And as a human body has diversity, unity, and interdependence of members, so it is with the church, the body of Christ. So we need to understand the fact that:

A. There Is Diversity among the Membership – Paul says in v.4, “For as in one body we have many members....” The human body is made up of many different members. Just your head alone has many members: eyes for seeing, ears for hearing, nose for smelling and breathing, a mouth for speaking, tasting, and eating. You have hands, arms, legs, feet, etc. The human body

¹ See also 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 1:23; 4:12, 16; 5:23, 30; Col. 1:24. Douglas Moo says, “Paul was not the first to compare a group of people to the human body. A number of ancient writers use that metaphor to argue that the political state, while comprising many very different kinds of people, was still a single entity” (p.404; cf. TDNT, 7:1038-39).

is also made up of many different vital organs. Each member of your body has one or more functions. Haven't you noticed that God loves variety in His created realm?

Why is it that God designed the body with so many different body parts? Well Paul goes on to say in v.4, "the members do not all have the same function." The word translated "function" (*praxis*) refers to an activity or function. Your lungs have a different function within the body than the heart. The lungs do a good job of delivering oxygen and expelling carbon dioxide, but they would do a poor job of anything else. My hands are good at holding and moving things, but they are not good for walking.

A football team² provides a good illustration of the need for diversity from many different members of the team. On offense, you need to have really big guys on the line to block. You need some strong, fast guys with good moves to be running backs. You need tall, fast guys with good hands and good moves to be wide receivers. You need a quarterback who is pretty smart, and a good leader. He needs to have a good arm, and it helps if he has some speed to avoid getting sacked. And then you have to have a kicker. He does not need to be very big or fast. He just needs to be able to kick the ball a good distance, and with accuracy.

Even so, the church is made up of many different members. This church has almost 200 members, and there is great diversity among the membership, for God never intended the members of the church to all be alike in functional ability. Now we are all to be like Christ morally and spiritually, but we are not all to be alike in terms of our service and function in the church. Some have leadership roles. Some others are to teach. Most others are to carry out some service role within the church. We have differences in talents and spiritual gifts. We have differences in personalities. We have differences in many other ways. And these differences enable us to carry out all the different functions and ministries that are needed in a church to fulfill our mission. So let us appreciate and affirm the value of our different roles and giftedness within the church.

Now even though there is diversity among the members of the Body of Christ:

B. Yet, There Must also Be Unity among the Membership – Paul goes on to say in v.5, "so we, being many, are one body in Christ..." Even though there needs to be diversity in function, and in other ways, we are all to come together as one in terms of our loyalty to Christ, and in terms of our core theological beliefs and practices, and in terms of our mission. Jesus prayed in John 17 that His people would be one. The body is healthy and functions well to the degree that there is harmony within the body.

Can you imagine what it would be like if there were no unity to the members of my body? Have you ever seen a preacher speak while his gestures and facial expressions do not match up with what he is saying? If a preacher submitted the video with that kind of disunity to our Transition Team, he would quickly be disqualified from further consideration!

Even so, maintaining unity with the various members of the body of Christ is very important. There is no way you can maintain good spiritual health if you do not remain in good fellowship with a local church. Eph. 4:3 says we are to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Furthermore, when there is division within the body of Christ, our witness is adversely affected. If Christians have trouble being reconciled to one another, how can we tell sinners to be reconciled to God? When there is division, we are spiritually unhealthy. We have to divert attention away from our primary mission to the task of bringing healing to the body.

² Adapt to whatever sport season we are in.

So as we seek to maintain unity with one another as one body, let's understand that it also involves unity of purpose. Every member should be working together in a variety of ministries and roles to accomplish our common mission. For example, let's say that your body is going to compete in a race. For you to win, each member of your body has to work together to achieve the same goal, performing its own function. The heart needs to start beating faster, the lungs need to start breathing faster, the muscles need to work harder, and so forth.

Even so, if the church is going to fulfill the mission given to us by Christ, we must all work together to achieve that common purpose. That means we need to understand what our mission is. We are to worship the Lord and bring glory to Him. We are to reach the lost for Christ. We are to make disciples, helping believers grow in their faith and become more like Jesus. We are to help those who have needs in Jesus' name, beginning with the household of faith (Gal. 6:10). We get into trouble when some members want the entire church to focus on less important objectives. This unity of purpose makes it imperative that each perform his or her duty for the good of the whole, and to help achieve our mission.

Now in order to promote unity, we need to understand yet another truth about the Body of Christ:

C. There Is also Interdependence among the Membership – Notice that Paul says in the last of v.5 that we are “individually members of one another.” We need each other to grow and to serve effectively in the fulfillment of our mission. We must maintain harmony within the body because we are so interdependent, members of the same body.

Let's imagine the heart getting mad at the lungs and saying, “Well, I'm not going to give the lungs any more blood.” But when that happens, the heart soon finds out that it is not getting any more oxygen. Each member is interdependent. Or suppose the arm decides it's going to sever itself and try to live independently from the body. First of all, the arm would die and the body would become handicapped. When one member isn't functioning well or at all, the other members will suffer for it.

Even so, it's like someone saying, “I'm not going to sing in the praise team anymore.” Well, if that happens, the Body is affected. Or, “I'm not going to serve in the nursery anymore.” If that happens, the Body is affected. Or “I'm not going to serve on that ministry team anymore.” When that happens, the other members of the body of Christ are affected. That's because we are all interdependent. It is so important that each of us carries out our role within the church for the common good.³

Now because each member is interdependent, that means:

1. Each Member Is Important – Even the pastor needs something spiritual from the members to whom he ministers. In fact, Paul wrote back in 1:11-12 that he wanted to go to Rome to impart some spiritual gift to the church, but he also expected to be “mutually encouraged by each other's faith” (cf. 15:32). Some people tend to think, “That church doesn't need me. What I do isn't important.” But that's not true. The church needs you to carry out your proper role within the church. If you think your hand is not important, just watch what happens if you lose it. You will not function as well without it. So we should not underestimate our importance or value in the church. If we do, we will tend to fail to use the gift that God has given us. We should not regard a member as unimportant. Even a young child is important to this church. Think of the joy the children bring to us. Some of these dear children bring friends or

³ Now there are times when you need to quit something that God has not enabled you to do, but that's not my point here.

even parents to church. Sometimes we can learn something from a child. They exemplify childlike faith. So they are important. Even the Senior Adult who is no longer able bodied is still important to this church. They pray. They give. They make phone calls, checking on others. They can share wisdom from a lifetime of experience. *Every* member of the Body of Christ is important, including those of you who serve behind-the-scenes. Don't say to yourself, "That church doesn't need me. I have nothing to offer to that church."

So unless you have a clear leading of the Lord, don't leave or drop out of your church. On the other hand, the leaders and members of the body need to make every effort to keep members connected to the fellowship, for we need *all* the members of the body. We need to give members opportunity to exercise their gifts within the body, even if they make mistakes. That's part of the learning process.

However, this teaching of the apostle Paul also means that:

2. No Member Is All Important – Certain members of the body of Christ who have great and visible gifts tend to overestimate their own importance. They develop spiritual superiority. That is part of what Paul is seeking to get across in v.3, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think...."⁴ Based on the context, Paul is warning that we are not to think more highly of our function in the body of Christ than we ought. This exhortation would not be first on the list if too high an estimation of self were not a common failing among Christians. This is a problem with some pastors and church leaders. Some may think so highly of themselves that they believe they do not need the ministry and input of other believers. You are important, but don't think for a minute that the church would just fall apart and die if you were to leave and quit your work here.

Paul said in 1 Cor. 12:21, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" Imagine how well the hand would hammer a nail without the eye? The other hand would not want to hold the nail in that scenario! The Corinthians had a problem with seeking the showy gifts. They had the mind-set of Diotrephes, who sought preeminence within his church (3 John 9). James addressed the problem when he told his readers not to be too eager to become teachers, not only because of the great responsibility involved, but also because such leaders are held to a higher standard (3:1). For a Christian to minimize the other gifts and functions while he emphasizes his own gift and function is to deny the very purpose for which gifts are given: the benefit of the whole Body of Christ.

By the way, those who think too highly of themselves tend to devalue and think less of others. That kind of attitude does not create healthy relationships within the body. That kind of attitude tends to create jealousy and dissention within the Body.

So instead of thinking of ourselves "more highly" than we ought, v.3 also says we are "think with sober judgment" (*sophroneo*), which means to be of sound mind. We are to have a balanced, sensible, realistic view of ourselves. To be highminded is a form of spiritual insanity. We cannot function as a body if each person is inflating his own importance and diminishing the importance of other's work. Remember, if you have the gifts and a role within the body of Christ that gives you more prominence, this is bestowed by God's grace and not because you deserve it. We owe everything we have to God (1 Cor. 4:7). Christ said, "Without me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5; NKJV). Surely the believer who is proud of a gift that has been bestowed by the Holy Spirit is taking to himself the glory which belongs to God.

⁴ Paul uses some form of the Greek verb "to think" (*phroneo*) four times in this verse. He asked us yeah absolutely

So let us understand the nature of the church. We are to have diversity of gifts and functions, we are to seek to maintain unity for we are interdependent. Next, I call upon you to:

II. SUBMIT TO THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH

This is not stated as clearly here in Romans as it is in Ephesians (5:23) and Colossians (1:18; 2:19). But this truth is at least implied here, and I believe that truth is important to bring up. The body must have a head, a brain, to control and direct the many different members of the body. Jesus is the Head of the church. His Lordship is stated many times in Romans. For example, Rom. 14:9 says, “For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.” He is certainly to be Lord of His church, and Lord of each member. So as the Lord and Head of the Church:

A. He Leads the Church – The Head contains the mind which directs the body. It is not the foot that is supposed to tell the other members what to do, but the head. Not even the lead pastor is to rule the church, but the pastor is like the mouth of the body. He is to study God’s Word and pray with his fellow elders to find out God’s will for the body, and instruct the body from God’s Word and lead the body to do the will of God.

Even so, Jesus is the head of the church. He rules the Church. Individual members should not rule the church except to the extent that we have been given Scriptural authority to lead on behalf of Christ (1 Peter 5:1, 4). We allow members to vote on certain matters but even then, we are to vote in accordance to what we believe the will of God to be, based on principles of the Word of God. If we do not all submit to Christ the Head, *and* the leadership that He has ordained within the church (Hebrews 13:17), then there will be disunity and division within the Body. That leads to all kinds of problems. We will only be unified to the degree that we follow the Head of the church, Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, as Head of the Body of Christ:

B. He Equips Us with a Spiritual Gift – Paul says in v.6, “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them....” Each member of the body of Christ has a function to perform *and* a God-given gift to enable us to serve effectively in that ministry. Though we should use our natural born talents for the Lord, that is not what Paul has in mind here. Rather, he has in mind those spiritual gifts that you receive when you are born again by the Spirit of God. Such a gift is beyond our natural abilities. That explains how humble, common men, filled with the Holy Spirit, were amazingly effective in the hands of God, as we see in the book of Acts (2:7, 12; 4:8, 13; 9:20-21).

However, natural talents do illustrate spiritual gifts. For example, two individuals can work equally as hard at learning to play the piano, but the one endowed with musical talent will excel the one who has less talent, and far excel the one who has no musical talent.

So notice some of the truths about these gifts that we should be aware of:

1. These Are Sovereign Gifts – This is clearly stated in 1 Cor. 12:11 where Paul states that the Lord distributes the gifts “as He wills.” The Head decides which gifts we receive. You do not get to choose what your spiritual gift is. You are not to say to the Lord, “God, I don’t like the gift that you have given me. I don’t want to have the gift of service; I would rather be a preacher or singer or teacher.” It is not for us to decide what role we will have within the church. That is the Lord’s decision.

2. These Are Grace Gifts – In v.6 Paul mentions the fact that these are grace gifts, for that is the meaning of the word *charisma*, translated “gifts”. Also, Paul specifically states in v.6, “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us...” No one earns their gift by good works or by religious accomplishments. No one can buy a certain gift with a large donation, like Simon Magus tried to do (Acts 8:18). God does not give a person the gift of preaching or teaching as some reward. It is given purely by His grace. If you have one of the gifts that seems to be more desirable or prominent, it is not because you are better than someone else in the Body.

This is one reason why Paul said in v.3, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think...” Paul understood this truth regarding his own ministry. When he mentions “the grace given to me,” he is specifically thinking of the grace bestowed upon him in his apostolic commission (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10; Gal. 2:9; Eph. 3:7-8). His calling and giftedness to be an apostle of the Lord was only by the grace of God. (By the way, Paul’s teaching carries the apostolic authority graciously bestowed upon him by God and we are to give heed to his teaching). So if you have been endowed with one of the prominent roles and gifts within the church, and God has blessed you with effectiveness, don’t get the big head. Your position and effectiveness has far more to do with God than with you.⁵

3. God Gives the Faith We Need to Exercise These Gifts – Paul says in the last of v.3 that “each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” Paul emphasizes that God has distributed a measure, or sufficient amount, of faith to each one; no one is excluded. He is not talking about saving faith but the faith needed to exercise our gifts. It takes faith to step out and do a certain ministry, trusting God to help you do that ministry by means of a spiritual gift. Some gifts require greater faith than others. Yet no gift is exercised apart from faith directed to God. So not only is the gift from God, but the exercise of the gift requires the aid of God. So highmindedness is again excluded.

God called me to preach, and to teach His Word by the age of 17. At the time, I had no natural ability to do what God was calling me to do. I stuttered and stammered. I could not speak well at all, especially in front of a group of people. But I learned that what God calls you to do, He will equip you to do if you will only step out on faith. I did that the day after my 18th birthday, when I announced my call to preach in front of about 1,000 people in my home church in Rome, Georgia. God was indeed true to His Word. He gave me the faith to believe He would help me, and sure enough, I was able to give my testimony of His call to the ministry without stuttering!

Even so, God may be calling you to be a teacher, and if so, trust Him to enable you to be effective in that role. Look for other opportunities for service that will be given to you. Step out on faith and say, “Here am I, send me.” And this leads to my last main point. Understanding the nature of the church and the fact that you have received at least one spiritual gift to enable you to serve in the ministry of the church, I call upon you to:

III. EXERCISE YOUR GIFTS!

Paul says in v.6, “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...” The words “let us use them” are not in the original text but implied. Yet Peter specifically says in 1 Peter 4:10, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good

⁵ 1 Cor. 4:7 says, “For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”

stewards of God's varied grace." Whatever gift you have been given, you are under obligation to the Lord to use it to serve His people. I would add what Paul told Timothy, "Do not neglect the gift you have..." (1 Tim. 4:14). He also told him to "stir up the gift of God, which is in you..." (2 Tim. 1:6).

In our next message from Romans, we will get into the specifics of what some of the gifts are, and how they are to be used. But for now, I want to appeal to you to make a commitment to serve the Lord faithfully in the local church, especially in the ways that you do know you are gifted in. We are the body of Christ in this world. He works through His church.

During World War II one of the churches that was destroyed was St. Mark's in Frankfurt, Germany. When the roof collapsed, a statue of Christ was buried in the ruins. After the war, people were cleaning up the site and discovered the statue of Christ. The problem was the hands had been broken off and were destroyed. The leaders of the church determined that they would place the statue in a prominent location without the hands. The reason was that it would be a stark reminder that *we* are the hands of Christ in this world, for we are His body.⁶

Folks, when it comes to ministry in our world, Christ has chosen to use our hands, our feet, and our voice. I also challenge you to commit yourself to learning more about the spiritual gifts, and have a willing spirit to serve in whatever way the Lord leads you and enables you.

Conclusion: I trust that by now you understand the nature of the church. We are the Body of Christ. Therefore, we need to embrace the need for diversity within the Body. Let not our differences divide us but enable us to fulfill all the various aspects of our mission. We also need to strive for unity within the Body. A house divided will fall. We will be more likely to maintain unity when we understand how interdependent we are.

Furthermore, God has provided the means for effective ministry in the church. He has gifted the Body with spiritual gifts. And He has given us the faith we need to exercise our gifts. Are you functioning within the Body of Christ? About half of our members do not even attend the typical church with any regularity. How can they carry out their function within the Church? Others are regular attendees, but they are not reaching their potential in helping us fulfill our mission as a church. Will you make a commitment to serve as a functioning member of Harvest Christian Fellowship?

Then there are those who attend but have not joined. Some say, "Well, I'm a Christian, but I don't want to belong to any church." That's like saying, "I'm a football player, but I don't want to be a part of any team." That's like saying, "I'm a tuba player, but I don't want to be a part of an orchestra." That just doesn't work. A Christian needs to be a functioning member of a church.⁷ Could it be that the Lord would lead you to join this local church? We need you to have a more effective ministry, and you cannot be a fully functioning part of a local church without becoming a member of that church.

If you are not yet a Christian, you need to be saved before you can truly become a member of the Body of Christ. You can lie about being saved and get your name on the church roll without being saved, but you can't become a true member of the Body of Christ without repenting of your sins and putting your faith in Christ. So if you need to talk to someone about a saving relationship to Christ or becoming a member of this church, seek out an elder in the foyer after the service.

⁶ J. Michael Shannon, "To Illustrate" in *Preaching* (January-February 2007), 73.

⁷ Rick Warren, "Formed for God's Family," Oct., 2002.

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 4, "God's Discipline" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hgts, VA: Published by Author), 2022; John MacArthur, Jr., *A Living Sacrifice: Study Notes on Romans 12:1-8* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1987); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's New Testament Insights on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Crossway, Good News Publishers, 2001). Barclay, Hobbs & Ironside read but not used.

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