

Romans: The Good News of God

A Call to Humility and Service

Romans 12:3-8

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August 9, 2009

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Scripture

Today we continue our study in Romans 12. Last month we concluded ten sermons on Romans 12:1-2. In these verses Paul makes a grand declaration about Christian living.

He says, in a very provocative way, that he wants us to live our lives for God. He wants us to give ourselves for God, and he does it in a striking way. He says that he wants us to put ourselves up on the altar. All the people in his day and time would have been familiar with sacrifices. Paul is saying to them, “Climb up on that altar and give yourself to God.”

Then when Paul gets to Romans 12:3 he wants to talk to us about how we relate to the family of God. He wants us to think about how grace works in the family of God. That’s what we’re looking at today in God’s Word. So, let’s read Romans 12:3-8:

³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:3-8)

Introduction

Paul is speaking to Christians—and not just to those Roman

Christians almost 2,000 years ago—about how we ought to relate to one another, how we ought to serve one another, and how we ought to use our gifts, abilities and resources to help one another.

Lesson

In the context of the discussion, Paul gives us three platforms for serving one another in the church. They are humility, the communion of the saints, and the use of spiritual gifts. Let's look at each in turn.

I. Grace Should Lead to Humility (12:3)

First, grace should lead to humility. Paul says in verse 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, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”**

Grace, Paul knows, can lead to pride, if we're not careful. It ought not to, it's not designed to do that, but there is no blessing that God gives that we cannot turn upside down.

So Paul knows that grace on occasion leads to spiritual pride and he doesn't want it to do so. He wants it to lead to humility. Paul is speaking here not just as an apostle, but as an example. He's standing before us as a person who has been given the grace of apostleship.

Now, none of us has been given the grace of apostleship. Paul is emphasizing that he is speaking to us as Christians in light of the grace that had been given to him and in light of the fact that this grace that God had given to him had not led him to spiritual pride, but had cultivated real humility in him.

In fact, you can trace Paul's humility in passing comments that he makes in his letters. He refers to himself in one place as “the least of the apostles” (1 Corinthians 15:9). In another place he refers to himself as “the foremost” of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15).

Paul was confident in what the Lord had called him to do. He was secure in his relationship with the living God, but he was not puffed up. And that is marvelous in light of the grace that God had given to him.

So when he says in verse 3, **“by the grace given to me,”** he wants to tell you something. It’s important for us not to be puffed up by the grace that God has given to us. Paul comes to us and says, “Look I have been given grace upon grace, and by his grace I have not cultivated a spirit of pride, but of humility. Therefore, you too ought to cultivate humility.”

We are able to see then that Paul is not telling us to do something that he has not done himself. Paul is telling us here in verse 3 that we ought to serve one another because of humility. Grace should lead us to humility.

Paul wants us to see that that humility is necessary in order to serve one another as we ought. He says in verse 3, **“I say to everyone among you.”** There is evidently a possibility among the Roman Christians that some of them were allowing spiritual pride to get the best of them. The grace that they had received had led them to be spiritually proud, and Paul wants to deal with that pride here. He wants to deal with the attitude that looks out for number one first.

Paul wants to cultivate another attitude among these Christians. He doesn’t want them internal and self-centered. He wants them humbled and other-serving. So Paul says, **“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.”**

Now, Paul is not asking us to poormouth ourselves. Paul is not trying to start a contest among Christians for those who can seem most self-abasing. You know, the Christian who never looks up at you, just sort of holds his head over thinking that this is the most spiritual posture that he can possibly be in, never to look up. Sort of hunched over and arched way down with a great burden of self-doubt. This is not what the apostle is asking for. In fact he explicitly says that he’s asking for a sober self-assessment: **“But to**

think with sober judgment.”

That, on the one hand, means that you realize that every gift you have is just that, a gift of God. You didn't create that in you. He created that in you. On the other hand, Paul wants us to be mindful of what our gifts are. This kind of humility is a fertile soil for Christian service to others.

I'll never forget a Christmas Eve dinner I had at the home of the Bishop of the Church of England in South Africa. Bishop Bradley was the leader of the entire denomination in South Africa, and I felt honored to be invited to his home for dinner with about a dozen other guests. After a delightful Christmas Eve dinner I noticed that the Bishop had not been at the table for quite a while. I wandered in to the kitchen, and there was the Bishop, all by himself with his sleeves rolled up, washing the dishes. Well! I could hardly turn around and go and sit down. So, I picked up a towel and helped dry the dishes the Bishop was washing. Actually, it turned out to be a wonderful time for me because I was able to have about 45 minutes one-on-one with the Bishop. But, more significantly, his example of humility deeply touched me.

Humility. That's the first thing that Paul says in this passage. We ought to serve one another out of humility.

II. We Should Serve Others (12:4-5)

Second, we should serve others. Paul says in verses 4-5: **“For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”**

Paul says that because of the reality of the communion of saints, we ought to serve one another. Now, it is important to note that unity does not mean unanimity or identicalness or equality.

Paul asks you to contemplate two realities at the same time in verse 4. First, he asks you to remember that we are part of one body. Second, he asks you to remember that we are not the same. Just as we have many members in one body, and all the members

do not have the same function. We're part of one body, we're not the same.

This is a vital truth in a day dominated by egalitarianism of various sorts that wants to say to you, "If you tell me that people have different functions, you're robbing them of equality."

For instance, if you say that a woman can't be a preacher, you're robbing her of equality with men because she can't perform the same function. The logic goes like this: sameness of function means real equality.

But Paul says, "I want you to understand that we are one, but we do not share the same functions." Paul emphatically asserts both of those at the same time. Christian unity, rightly understood, does not undercut the differences that exist among Christians, and differences among Christians are not to undercut the reality of Christian unity. I know that they can, but Paul says they are not to do this.

So, let me give you three truths that Paul is asserting in verse 4. *First, unity does not mean sameness or identicalness.*

Just because we are all part of the family of God doesn't mean that I am you and you are me. You're you and I'm me, and I'm not you and you're not me—and that's okay!

Paul is not saying that Christian salvation transforms us into a bunch of interchangeable units. No, it doesn't. We continue to be distinct personalities. We continue to have distinct gifts. Those gifts are to be used in a particular way, but that does not mean that our unity is thereby disrupted simply because there are differences between us. Unity does not mean sameness or identicalness.

Second, unity does not mean interchangeability. One size does not fit all in the kingdom of God. There are differing gifts. Paul stresses this in verse 4. All the members do not have the same function. He'll stress it again in verse 6, "**Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.**" So, there are differing gifts in the body. Not everybody in the body has the same set of gifts.

Finally, unity does not mean that we are unable to differentiate between members of the kingdom. There are non-transferable

functions that we each have in the kingdom of God. I can't have babies. That's a non-transferable function in the family of God. I can't do it. It's a non-transferable thing, and that's okay. We have different gifts and responsibilities in the kingdom of God.

Now comes the flip side. Look at verse 5. Paul wants us to know two truths again in verse 5: that there is diversity in our unity and we belong to one another. He says, **“So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”**

Paul is telling us that just because we are different doesn't mean that we lack unity. Diversity does not mean disunity. In fact, Paul says even though we are different, we are part of one in the same body of Christ.

Paul is reminding us of the overarching reality of the communion of the saints. We are one, we belong to one another, we're part of one another, and we are in a shared fellowship of life because of our union with Jesus Christ. We are different. Some of us are as different as night and day, but we are for one another and we are to live for one another. It's almost like that motto of the Three Musketeers, “One for all and all for one.”

One of the real challenges we face in living this reality in twenty-first century America is our individualism. We think first of the self and then everybody else, and then if we get outside of our self box, we think of our own nuclear family and then everybody else is way down on the list.

Paul is encouraging us to remember that we are part of the body. That body is the greatest spiritual reality of fellowship that we could possibly conceive. We have a spiritual family to care for and we ought to serve one another because of the reality of being in that body. So, there is an impetus for Christians serve, because of humility in verse 3, and because of the communion of saints in verses 4 and 5.

As you know, a team of thirteen went down to Ciudad Victoria in northern Mexico a week ago to work at a Christian school called Colegio Renuevo. We built an outdoor playground set, painted 14 classrooms, laid floor tiles in several classrooms,

cleaned the dusty library books and catalogued them. One of the team members wrote a note to the rest of the team, a part of which I would like to quote:

It was my pleasure to get to know you all last week as we served together at Colegio Renuevo painting, building the playground set and working in the library. As I think ahead to the school year starting in Ciudad Victoria, I envision all the children gleefully playing in the backyard on the new set, having a well-stocked and orderly library, and studying in a newly painted classroom. Let's all keep our Mexican friends at the school in our prayers as they seek to further God's Kingdom through education.

This is an excellent example of serving others because of the communion of the saints. Most of us could not speak Spanish, but we could do tasks that would make the school a clean, inviting environment for learning so that the Spanish-speaking teachers could share with the children love of God in Christ and impart a biblical worldview to those precious children.

III. Christians Serve One Another Because the Spiritual Gifts Are Meant for the Body (12:6-8)

Finally, Christians serve one another because the spiritual gifts are meant for the body. Paul says in verses 6-8: **“Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.”**

The spiritual gifts are meant for the body of Christ. We serve one another because of humility. We serve one another because we are in this body, this communion of saints, and we serve one another because the spiritual gifts that God gives to us are for service to the body.

Paul indicates that there are real differences of functions among believers in verse 6. He says that since this is so, since we have differing gifts, and since we have received those gifts from a gracious God, then we ought to use them accordingly for his glory and for the edification of the saints and for the building up of the body.

Your ability to edify another does not derive from native powers. It derives from spiritually-gifted graces.

Now, in verses 6 through 8, Paul begins to rattle off seven gifts. This is not a complete list. Paul will give other lists elsewhere (in 1 Corinthians 12:7-10; 12:28; and Ephesians 4:11), but he's giving these gifts as examples of things given to the church by the Holy Spirit and as he does so he speaks of how they ought to be used.

First, he speaks of **prophecy**. Prophecy is the ability to pass along direct words of revelation from God. But notice what Paul says. He's speaking to a church in which there were those who had the ability to prophecy, that is, to convey a special revelation directly from God to his people. Notice what he says, "**Let us use them. . . in proportion to our faith**" (12:6b).

The prophet must, as a person of faith, show his trust and obedience to God's word. Paul does not want to see someone claiming to be a prophet pronouncing the words of God and yet not living in accordance with those words. That can happen.

Dr. Ligon Duncan mentioned that he once met with someone who claimed to have the gift of prophecy and yet wanted to divorce her spouse. She claimed to convey direct words of revelation from God, but couldn't obey God's written word.

I should mention that the gift of prophecy, in the sense of delivering direct revelation from God, is no longer given by God in today's church. Prophecy is a supernatural gift, and it was given to authenticate the apostles as God's messengers. Since the canon of Scripture is now closed, we no longer need nor have the gift of prophecy in the church.

Second, "**If service, in our serving**" (12:7a). All the various

services in the Christian life are included, high and low, known and unknown. Paul is saying, “If you have the gift of serving, exercise it. Don’t wait for someone to honor you. Don’t think, ‘Well I’d like to have a flashier gift than that.’” If you have the gift of service, serve. Those with the gift of serving must exercise it rather than seeking for something more exalted to do. This gift perhaps has some special application to those who were deacons of the church.

Third, **“the one who teaches, in his teaching”** (12:7b). The teaching which Paul is speaking of is the teaching of the truth, the conveying of the life of faith. And you can imagine how vital that would have been in the life of the early church. It’s vital today, but think of then. Many of the members of the congregation would not have been able to read themselves, and even if they could, they would have had no Bibles. They were very dependent on the teaching given by the teacher. And so the teacher ought to be cognizant that teaching is a gift to him. And teaching is not for his own self-satisfaction or for his self-aggrandizement, but rather for the people of God.

Fourth, **“the one who exhorts, in his exhortation”** (12:8a). I think that Paul puts exhortation next to teaching because exhortation is extremely important. Paul has in mind the stimulating and the prompting of believers to embrace the truth and the life of faith. Not only to teach them about it, but to exhort them to actually live it.

Fifth, **“the one who contributes, in generosity”** (12:8b). He speaks of those who contribute to the needs of others and come to the aid of the poor. And he’s saying that this should be done freely, generously, and not grudgingly.

Sixth, **“the one who leads, with zeal”** (12:8c). He’s saying that those that are gifted with leadership in the church must not be sidetracked but be diligent.

Author Iain Murray once compared and contrasted Charles Spurgeon and D. Martin Lloyd-Jones. Spurgeon wrote many books, Lloyd-Jones never wrote a book. The books that we have of

Lloyd-Jones are transcribed sermons. They had many differences, but one thing he noted that they had in common was that they were entirely focused on their work. The kingdom was everything to them. The kingdom of God was the focus of their lives and in that sense they were men very much alike.

Paul is saying that those who are gifted with the abilities of leading the church need to be diligent and should not be side-tracked in that work. This of course has special application to those who are elders in the church.

Finally, **“the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.”** He’s speaking of those who show compassion to those who are sick or suffering, or indigent, and this has to be done, he says, cheerfully and not resentfully.

Paul’s point is this, whatever God has given you by way of personal abilities and resources, it is for the edification of the body. It belongs to the body. You are not to put it under a bushel, you’re not to squander it, and you are to use it for the body.

And so in this way Paul has said, Christian humility compels us to serve one another. A realization that we’re part of the communion of saints compels us to serve one another. A realization that everything that God has given us he’s given to us for one another ought to compel us to serve one another.

Conclusion

May God help each one of us to serve one another because of humility, to serve one another because we are in this body, and to serve one another because the spiritual gifts that God gives to us are for service to the body. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

Taken from Ray Ortland's *A Passion for God*:

Lord Jesus Christ, if you are willing to own the church as yours, how can we stand detached? If you are active within it, how can we withhold involvement? We thrill to the vision of your church as that holy catholic army marching through history, triumphant over her foes. But the particular churches we see around us hardly match that glorious vision. And a streak of pride runs deep within us, choking fellowship at its root. Forgive us, Lord. Along with the spiritual gift you have graciously given each one of us, impart to us as well the humility to put that gift to work in fruitful partnership with the ministry of our church.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.