

Faith and Transformation

Devotional Reading: Ezekiel 11:17-21

Background Scripture: Romans 12:3-8

Today's Scripture: Romans 12:3-8

I. How to Think Romans 12:3-5

3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.

4 For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office:

5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.

3a. This verse starts with a conjunction by which Paul introduces the logical explanation for what he has already said. The ability to discern the “good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Romans 12:2) begins with the correct thought of ourselves. The word *for* seems to introduce the way people should think of themselves in the appropriate manner: by being “renewed in the spirit of your mind” (Ephesians 4:23). Paul is able to offer this imperative because of *the grace given* to him—an expression he never tires of using (see Romans 15:15; 1 Corinthians 15:10; Galatians 2:9; Ephesians 3:7; 4:7). That phrase establishes his authority as coming from God.

3b. For a person *to think soberly* is to think rationally and appropriately. Paul introduced the common standard of measurement by which to evaluate oneself: it is *the measure of faith*. But there is debate over what kind of faith Paul had in mind. The two main possibilities are the “common faith” that every Christian has (see Titus 1:4) and “distributed” faith, which is given for differing capacities for service (see 2 Corinthians 10:13). There are strong arguments both ways. But notice that in either case, the measure is not that of one person compared to another person—the natural and unhealthy tendency.

4. Paul uses this analogy to the human *body* also in 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 and Ephesians 4:16. It should be obvious that not all parts of the *body* perform the same function. A hand does not function as an ear and vice versa. We note that the word *office* is not referring to the offices of elder, deacon, etc. The Greek underneath this word is also translated “deeds” in Romans 8:13 and Colossians 3:9, and that is the sense here.

5. Paul desired his readers to think in terms of *one* as a collective singular of *many*. As Christians cannot serve effectively apart from other Christians, so also *one body* cannot operate independently of the head, who is *Christ*. These themes are

so important that Paul repeats them in several places (see 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:12, 25; Colossians 1:18, 24).

II. How to Serve Romans 12:6-8

6 Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith;

7 Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching;

8 Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.

6. The echo of 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 is quite strong here and in the two verses that follow. With the word *prophecy*, Paul begins a list of seven *gifts differing*, which fall into a group of four and a group of three. The gift of prophecy is also found in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11. Paul prized the appropriate display of this gift (see 1 Corinthians 14).

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.

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. Most of all, these gifts are intended to be displays of love between believers.

7a. We move to the second gift in Paul's grouping of four. The word translated *ministry* and *ministering* is also translated "serve" in Romans 15:31, and that is the sense here. "Service" was the usual way to describe the work that Christians did on behalf of others. As Paul uses this word, he can refer to various types of service:

- Christian ministry in general (Romans 15:25; Philemon 13);
- The ministry of Christ (Romans 15:8; Galatians 2:17);
- Specific Christian ministries (Romans 11:13; 2 Corinthians 9:12-13);
- Ministry of the office of deacon (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8-13);
- Ministry of a secular authority (Romans 13:4).

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.

7b. The gift of *teaching* is also noted in 1 Corinthians 12:28-29 and Ephesians 4:11. In the text before us, Paul is focusing on *he that teacheth* rather than the gift of teaching as such. Why he makes this switch is unclear. What is clear, however, is that teaching is distinct from prophesying. Prophecy is based on revealing the information that God has placed in the prophet's mouth; teaching, on the other hand, involves communicating the truth of the gospel.

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.

8a. We come to the fourth gift in Paul's subgrouping of four well-defined spiritual gifts. He uses the verb translated *exhorteth* and the noun translated *exhortation* a total of 80 times across his letters. The ways he uses the verb in 60 occurrences are translated "comfort(eth)" (example: twice in 2 Corinthians 1:4), "beseech" (example: 2:8), or "exhort" (as here). The 20 times he uses the noun are translated "comfort" (example: 1:4), "consolation" (example: Romans 15:5), or "exhortation" (as in this verse).

Putting this all together, we get the idea that Paul is challenging those with this gift to use it in terms of being a bit stronger than merely "requesting" something of someone else but a bit less strong than "commanding" that person.

8b. We come now to the first in a subgrouping of three spiritual gifts—gifts that are less-defined than the previous four. To give is to share with another or the church what one has. This is an expectation of all believers. The word translated *simplicity* occurs eight times in the New Testament, always in Paul's letters. Its translations in other passages are "liberal(ity)" (2 Corinthians 8:2; 9:13), "bountifulness" (9:11), and "singleness" of heart (Ephesians 6:5; Colossians 3:22). Understanding "simplicity" to reflect "singleness of purpose" seems to be the idea. There are to be no ulterior motives for giving.

8c. As with the word translated *simplicity* (Romans 12:8b), the Greek word translated *ruleth* occurs eight times in the New Testament, always in Paul's letters. It is used of church leadership,

family leadership or household management, and self-management. The overall idea is that of "one who presides." To be such a person is to be in control in a godly sense.

8d. 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. In the Beatitudes, Jesus stated "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7).

No specific ways of being merciful are listed in the text before us, and Paul seems intentionally to want the general sense. As one who had received mercy, the importance of being merciful was quite personal to him (1 Timothy 1:13, 16). Indeed, the mercy we ourselves have received from God is the basis for our own acts of mercy, as Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant makes clear (Matthew 18:21-35). We see the *cheerfulness* aspect of showing mercy also reflected in giving (2 Corinthians 9:7), such giving being a specific kind of merciful act.

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.

As we wrap up our consideration of this subgrouping of three gifts, we should consider a possible implication regarding these gifts being less-defined than other gifts. That implication is that these three are expected of *all* Christians. Think about it: Shouldn't everyone give with sincerity (2 Corinthians 9:7)? Shouldn't everyone rule or manage at least his or her own life to keep from being unproductive (2 Peter 1:5-8)? Shouldn't everyone be merciful (James 2:13)?

Involvement Learning

Faith and Transformation

Into the Lesson

Do you enjoy jigsaw puzzles or building model trains or planes? Why or why not?

God has given us value and purpose, but He has also designed us to need each other. In today's lesson, think about how this truth is especially relevant in the church, among the body of believers.

Key Verse

Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us.
—Romans 12:6a

Into the Word

Read Romans 12:3-5. In what ways is the human body a fitting comparison to the church?

Why is it essential to recognize what we can do well?

What is significant about acknowledging the things we cannot do well?

Read Romans 12:6-8 and choose one of the spiritual gifts listed: prophesying, ministering/serving, teaching, exhorting/encouraging, giving, leading, showing mercy. What might the church be like without the presence of this gift?

What might the church be like if this were the only gift present?

How might the church encourage people with this gift?

How do 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 and Ephesians 4:1-16 help inform the use of this gift?

Into Life

In the space below, write down the spiritual gifts you believe you have. How can you use your gifts within the church? Consider a way you can practice that gift more effectively in the coming week.

Thought to Remember

Know your spiritual gifts and use them with humility.