

# Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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## **The Church and You** **Romans 12:1-8 (Part 1)**

Jack and Grace met through a mutual friend. From day one they seemed to be the perfect match. Grace was everything Jack had always wanted. She was beautiful, outgoing, and caring – always there when Jack needed her.

For the first five months they were inseparable. Jack could hardly think of anything but Grace. He didn't need to look further, he told his friends, “She's the one.”

Now almost three years have passed. Jack still enjoys the comfort and familiarity of being with Grace, but the spark is gone. Grace's flaws seem more obvious. He's not sure he finds her as attractive as he once did. And he's beginning to resent all the time she wants to spend with him.

One night, when she asks if they can define the nature of their relationship, Jack blows up, “We're together, aren't we?” he asks angrily. “Why isn't that enough for you?” Obviously Jack isn't ready for commitment. And it's unclear if he ever will be.

Have you ever been in a relationship like this? This is the question asked by Joshua Harris in the introduction of one of his most recent books. He continues to write “God has something better for you. He wants you in a relationship defined by both passion and commitment. But before you can take hold of this wonderful plan, you need to know something about this couple. There are millions of Jacks walking around today. And Grace isn't a girl. Grace is a church.

I would highly recommend that you read Joshua Harris' book, “Stop Dating the Church – Fall In Love With the Family of God.” In this book he challenges Christians to rethink their attitudes and involvement in the local church, recognizing that God has called us out of the world and into the Church and therefore into a local expression of this grand company of the redeemed. The author of the well-known book, “I Kissed Dating Goodbye” seeks to excite in believers something that has been missing; both a passion and commitment to the local church. It is interesting to me that one of the pictures of the church, as we have already noted in our times together, is that the church is the Bride of Christ. The Church was loved by God enough, loved by Jesus enough that the Father sent the Son to die for His bride's sin and to impart to her His righteousness so that she, that is all who comprise the Church, could dwell eternally with Him in glory.

And let me shock you with this thought before we move on to what I would like to address with you today. In Ephesians 5, the passage where we read that “Husbands” are to “love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her...” we find the Apostle Paul proving his point by quoting from Genesis 2 saying, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.” (Ephesians 5:31). Now consider what Paul is teaching in this Ephesians passage. God did not get his inspiration for loving the Church from marriage, but the reason why God created marriage was to illustrate His love for the Church. I love how Joshua Harris put it,

*God invented romance and pursuit and the promise of undying love between a man and a woman so that throughout our lives we could catch a faint glimmer of the intense love Christ has for those He died to save. What a passion He has for His Church!*

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And so, as believers we are called to be imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1) and conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29). If this be true then to be like Jesus is to love what He loves. If Jesus loves His Church this much, then ought we so love the Church? And to love the Church, that is all believers who have believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ, it must begin by your involvement and passion for the local church. Chuck Colson noted,

*Of course every believer is part of the universal church. But for any Christian who has a choice in the matter, failure to cleave to a particular church is failure to obey Christ.”*

That is sobering is it not? And let me give you one more quote from authors Brian Habig and Les Newsom from their book “The Enduring Community” noting,

*“All of us should concern ourselves with the challenges that face all people everywhere. But that concern cannot be expressed everywhere. We demonstrate our concern by acting and living where we are at.”*

And where has God called every believer? He has called them into the local Church. So we find ourselves continuing in our consideration of the Church, this church of which Paul was made a servant, a server according to the stewardship from God bestowed upon him for the benefit of that local congregation at Colosse. We noted last week that we are all to be servants, waiters, servers according to the stewardship, or plan that God has given us for the benefit of the church. This leads us to consider the truth that God has granted to every believer what we call a spiritual gift, a divine enablement, by which you are to be a benefit to the church.

You see beloved, if we are to develop the same passion and commitment for the Church as did Christ and the apostle Paul, part of it begins as we see what God has granted each one of us in order to see the body of Christ function as a God-glorifying, Christ-exalting entity in this fallen world.

This morning we leave for a moment our text in Colossians 1, but not the theme. Please turn with me to the book of Romans as we continue to understand the church and more specifically God’s call upon our lives to have a passion and commitment to the church. In Romans 12 we read in part of the spiritual gifts that God has given His people, these special endowments of divine power which enable us to carry out the vital duties of body life in Christ as members of His body. Let me stress, that spiritual gifts are supernatural enablements granted us so that supernatural results may be produced. So long as the Lord tarries, until that day when the Church is taken into glory and fully perfected, each believer will possess at least one spiritual gift by which he or she is to benefit the church. Once the Church is in glory, these spiritual gifts will cease, but until then they are to be practiced with increasing frequency and fervency. What we read in Romans 12:1-8 is one of the most fundamental, most basic aspects of Christian living – every believer belongs to one another and is to seek to benefit one another by the grace given to him by God. In this sense, there is nothing more important for you this morning than to seek to know and to practice fully that spiritual gift or gifts given to you by God. It is not a matter of option by one of obedience.

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## Romans 12:1-8

*1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. 3 For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. 4 For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. 6 Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; 7 if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; 8 or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.*

## Romans 12 - Background

Let me begin by reminding you how Paul works his way into Romans 12. In the first eleven chapters, Paul laid forth doctrine, the gospel according to God, the great truths of man's sin and therefore His need of a Savior, the provision of how unrighteous people may be made righteous before God by their belief in the Lord Jesus Christ as their substitute and sacrifice for sin; and the promise that those who are in Christ are transformed, made different from the world, set apart to live for God. Beginning in Romans 12, Paul puts feet to this doctrinal teaching, calling his readers to adopt and to manifest these truths in their day-to-day living. Romans 12:1-2 speaks of the very lifestyle which God's mercies motivate in us and which God's grace enables in us. If you have embraced the truths of Romans 1-11, there is to be a response on your part, a response motivated by the mercies of God. If you have experienced the grace of God in salvation, your response is to be one of gratitude, and it is this gratitude upon which Paul forms his appeal to believers. This appeal is that believers would pursue lives characterized by worship, worship expressed in self-sacrificial service; service that is for God, but is most fully manifested in our service to others. You cannot serve God without serving God's people. This worship, or service to God is to be thoughtful and according to God's Word rather than being shaped by the world around us. This service of worship requires renewed minds and transformed lives by which we begin to look at all things from God's perspective rather than our own. In short, Romans 12:1-2 is a call to have Christ come to have first place in everything, just as we have been studying in Colossians 1.

What does this service of worship look like? Beginning in Romans 12:3 and following, we see what the exercise of a renewed mind and a transformed life looks like. Perhaps it is surprising that the first thing Paul addresses when considering this new life in Christ is the believer's gifting and preparation to function with other believers in the church. We see this in verses 3-8. Our understanding and practice of how God has fitted us to serve one another in the church is paramount to our spiritual success both within the church to believers and outside the church to unbelievers. We need to stop being Jacks and be increasingly more like Christ.

Our text will be specifically Romans 12:3-8 and it divides into three sections. In verse 3, Paul calls believers, the church, to clear thinking about spiritual gifts. In verses 4 and 5, Paul calls the church to corporate thinking about spiritual gifts, meaning that our spiritual gifts must be

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understood and practiced in the context of the body of Christ. And finally Paul calls the church to consistent practice of spiritual gifts in verses 6-8 focusing on the attitudes and actions that are appropriate to specific spiritual gifts.

- I. The Church needs clear thinking about spiritual gifts (12:3)
- II. The Church needs corporate thinking about spiritual gifts (12:4-5)
- III. The Church needs consistent practice of spiritual gifts (12:6-8)

This morning we will look at the first point as we lay the foundation for this topic concerning spiritual gifts and then next week we will look at some of the specific spiritual gifts mentioned and how we should see them corporately, as a congregation. Prayerfully by this you can begin to determine what is or what are your gifts by which you, like Paul, might benefit the church.

## I. The Church needs clear thinking about spiritual gifts (12:3)

*For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.*

To begin with Paul address the church as individuals, starting with himself, stating for us that even as he is challenging each believer (and therefore challenging us in our thinking) he is actually utilizing his own spiritual gift. He teaches them how? He teaches them through the “grace” given to him, through the gift, the divine enablement and call on his own life. Paul referred to this “grace” gift by which he speaks at the very beginning of Romans where we read in Romans 1:5:

*Through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name’s sake (Romans 1:5).*

Paul’s spiritual gift was that of an apostle, one called out by the Lord Jesus Christ to lay the foundation of Christian teaching for the church. We know that Paul was not able to physically be at Rome when we wrote this letter, but that did not inhibit Paul from exercising his gift “by mail” if you will. As Paul wrote this letter, it would not only be of benefit to the Roman saints, but to all those who have been blessed by this letter down through history. Romans 12:3 begins by reminding us that Paul’s spiritual gift was given by God for our benefit.

Notice here in verse three that no one is left out, there is not one believer left behind as Paul writes **“to every man among you.”** These are truths that understood and practiced by every believer. I would also have you realize that Paul simply assumes (rightly so) that every believer has at least one spiritual gift to be exercised for the benefit of the church.

Paul is calling for clear thinking about this matter calling us in verse 2 not be **“conformed to this age”** but rather **“transformed by the renewing of our minds.”** In verse three Paul warns us saying **“not to think too highly of himself.”** Stop thinking like the world! Be transformed by the Word of God. The Greek for this phrase “not to think too highly of himself” means not to be “over-thinking” – not to be thinking more of oneself and therefore vain or arrogant. Both in the day of Paul as well as in our day, having a low self-esteem is seen as a great evil and the cause of all sorts of problems. But Paul addresses the opposite here, saying to

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be careful not to have too high of an estimation of ourselves. I find it interesting that the topic of low self-esteem is never mentioned in the New Testament. Instead, we are constantly warned about what? We are warned against personal pride, arrogance, and otherwise wrong thinking of ourselves. Even the person of "low self-esteem" is actually practicing a form of pride, of self-love and over thinking themselves. God created us to be great lovers, originally great lovers of God. But because of sin, we have become great lovers of anything but God. According to 2 Timothy 3:2-4, we are great lovers of self, of money, and of pleasure.

And such things, this wrong thinking of ourselves, this over-thinking of ourselves, will have adverse affects on our thinking about the church and about the gifts God has given us to benefit the church. We must get our thinking cleared up about our place in and our being enabled by God to benefit the church. And this starts by examining or recognizing any elements of pride in our lives. Would you consider where you may be thinking too highly of yourself concerning the church and your gifts? How may this happen?

To begin with, it is possible to over-think yourself because of the gift or gifts God has given you. Some who know their spiritual gift or gifts can become prideful because of what they can do for Christ and the church. Let us not forget that spiritual gifts are always and only given by God's grace. The Greek word for "spiritual gift" is "charismata" and the root of this is "charis" the Greek word for grace. Spiritual gifts are grace gifts, given to us not because we merited them but because God has sovereignly chosen to impart them as He sees fit. Spiritual gifts are therefore never a sign of a person's spirituality, for every man, every believer has at least one grace gift. Therefore, one's spiritual gift or gifts are not to be indicators of our worth. The problem is that we can tend to see the more visible and prominent gifts as being more important, or more valuable than the less visible gifts. And then the temptation could be for those with the more visible gifts to think themselves something, to begin to take credit for their efforts rather than remembering that what they do that benefits the church is only accomplished by God's grace working in them.

But there is a flip side to this that might be more of a temptation for most of you than this first. If you have been given a "less prominent" gift and therefore think it less important, you might be exercising pride by having an over-inflated estimation of yourself, thinking that your gift is beneath you, that you deserve something bigger or seemingly better. Paul addresses this in 1 Corinthians 12:14-16 saying:

***For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body (1 Corinthians 12:14-16).***

Do you see the problem of pride in these verses? Sometimes we are tempted to think that the problem here is one of low-self esteem. But it is not that we read of the foot saying, "Because I am a foot, I am not a part of the body." That would be a low view of self. Rather the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body." It is not that the "foot" thinks too little of himself but rather that he thinks too much of himself. Do not miss this. The point is that the foot wrongly believes that being a "hand" is more important than being a "foot." And so, he says that if he cannot be a "hand," he refuses to function as a part of the body at all. In other words, the "foot" thinks he is better than the gift he has been given. He is over-thinking himself. And

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because of his pride, there is not sacrificial service of worship but rather a self-seeking ambition. The problem of the “foot” is not that he needs more self-esteem, but rather that he needs more humility and gratitude for what God has given him and called him to.

Beloved, if you are certain about your spiritual gift but are not purposefully and actively seeking to exercise it because you think somehow that your gift is insignificant or unimportant, that it does not receive the attention of the more visible gifts and therefore it can be neglected without much consequence; such an attitude is one of pride for God has called all the gifts equally important. If you expect the preacher to exercise his gift of preaching to the best of his abilities, then should not the preacher and the rest of the church expect you to exercise your spiritual gift to the fullest extent possible week by week? To have the attitude of the “foot” in such a case is to be caught up in one’s own fleshly desires and ambitions. Such a “foot” needs to die to himself and take up practice of his spiritual gift with a sense of gratitude to God, realizing that God has graciously called him to fulfill whatever task or role needed to benefit the church. Someone has rightly said, “Individual Christians must not think of themselves as the whole church but as petals to the flower” – each petal is equally needed to manifest the full beauty of the flower.

For those of you who are uncertain about your spiritual gift, you’re not off the hook. I implore you by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice and pray that God would quickly reveal to you your gift and function in this body. Ignorance can be excused until truth is revealed. Now is the time to know and to practice your spiritual service of worship. Anything less would be a demonstration of pride on your part, over-thinking yourself not being needed; or simply not needing to be engaged in what God has called you to be engaged in.

How do we avoid this thinking to highly of ourselves? How do we avoid this tendency toward self-love and overthink ourselves. We need to seek true humility, a true looking up to God, seeing His holiness, His power and His wonder, causing us to see ourselves in need of His grace, in need of His enabling. Paul records two ways to see this humility realized.

First, we are to **“think so as to have sound judgment”**. The idea here is again that we might think rightly about ourselves, to judge rightly our motives and actions. This is a call to humility. And humility is not assuming the least role, but rather is both an attitude and action that results as we take an honest look at where we best fit by God’s call into the function of the body of Christ. Sound judgment is right thinking about yourself and your place in God’s body. Pride assumes or desires more prerogative than God has given us. The failure to pursue and practice your spiritual gifts for the benefit of the church is to have an exaggerated self-esteem or it is assume a lesser role than for what God has fitted you. This sound judgment is to have a balanced viewpoint of your harmonious contribution to the whole body of Christ. So humility is realized as we have this right thinking, this sound judgment of self.

The second way to see humility realized in our lives is as we practice or exercise our gift according to the measure of faith allotted to us by God. This “measure of faith” appears to be another description of “spiritual gifts”. Paul called his spiritual gift in verse 3, “the grace given me” and in verse 6 we see that spiritual gifts are called “the grace given to us.” These emphasize the grace of God, but here, the “measure of faith” emphasizes the “faith” given us by which we exercise our gifts. Simply put, we are to practice our gifts by faith. Sometimes we may not feel as though we can do whatever it is God has called us to do – we need to step out in faith. Sometimes we can hide behind our ignorance of what our gift is or how to best use our gifts for the benefit of the church – we must step out in faith. You have been granted a measure of faith.

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Use it. As we saw of Paul in Colossians 1:25, fully carry out your spiritual gift, your grace given to you, your measure of faith. This is clear thinking about spiritual gifts that you have at least one, given by grace and is to be practiced by faith with all humility to the glory of God and for the benefit of God’s people.

I wish we had more time to get practical in all this, but we will have to leave it here for this week. I know that some of you are prayerfully seeking to know your gifts and have been asking others and myself to help you identify what those gifts might be. Keep praying, keep asking and may it be our desire to see this body fully carrying out the service of worship God has called us to as we encourage one another to fully carry out their spiritual gifts.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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