

Coming in First Place ~ the preeminence of Jesus Christ

"... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything"(Colossians 1:18).

The Church and You **Romans 12:1-8 (Part 3)**

As we were driving home from the XL Ministries Bible conference, my son, who was reading a book that he had purchased there, asked to read a quote. We carefully listened to the following words:

It is not scientific doubt, not atheism, not pantheism, not agnosticism, that in our day and in this land is likely to quench the light of the gospel. It is a proud, sensuous, selfish, luxurious, church-going, hollow hearted prosperity.

I was astounded at the accuracy of the statement and began to make guesses as to who said that. Was it Albert Mohler, president of Southern Seminary? Was it John MacArthur, John Piper, or R.C. Sproul, gifted bible teachers? No, it was Frederic D. Huntington. Does that help any of you? Frederic Huntington was an American clergyman who wrote these words for *Forum* magazine in 1890.

Over one hundred years ago and it was recognized that something was missing from the church and its proclamation of the gospel. These words of Huntington are even truer today. What has happened? Stanley Haurwas noted;

The problem with the modern American church is that it is far too "modern American" and not nearly enough "church."

We live in times that constantly bombard us with "things" and "stuff" and "distractions" that can easily get our hearts and minds off of the very blessing, the very gift that believers in Christ have been given – namely the right and privilege of worshipping God and praising Him for salvation in the context of community, that is as the church, the body of Christ.

Over the past several weeks we have been examining our place, as individuals and as a group to the body of Christ. Taking a detour from our study in Colossians 1, where we noted that Paul referred to himself as a minister, or better put a servant/slave to the church, the body of Christ, desiring to fully carry out the ministry to which God had given him, we have seen that each of us, like Paul, have a ministry, a gift, a service to the body of Christ that we must also seek to fully carry out to the glory of God and for the common good of the body.

Let me have you turn to Romans 12 and follow along as I read for you verses 1-8. Then I will remind you of where we have been and then of what I would have us consider this morning. Romans 12:1-8 we read:

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

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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.

This text is about the church, the body of Christ. And if you would indulge me for a moment, let me give to you a definition or description of the church, of you and me gathered here today that I hope would prove beneficial. Beloved, *the church is a divinely gifted people commissioned by God to declare the excellencies of God.* Some of you might recognize a bit of 1 Peter 2:9 in this definition as well were Peter declares,

But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

Notice that in both Romans 12:3-8 and 1 Peter 2:9 we cannot escape the corporate nature of our labors. We are a divinely gifted people (Romans 12:6-8) commissioned by God to declare the excellencies of God (1 Peter 2:9). In Christ we are all of one race, we are all one priesthood, we are all one nation and we are all one people. When we fail to recognize and live out this definition of the church, we start to look more and more like "modern America" than the church; and although we may be "church-going" the world sees within us more of a *proud, sensuous, selfish, and luxurious* attitude rather than as those who have been gifted and commission by God to declare His excellencies. So what is the answer to this problem? How do we move from Huntington's and Haurwas' descriptions of the church? We need to be reminded of our call, our giftedness and increasingly work together to glorify God as the church. Now from our Romans 12 text we have already considered two points to this end. In verse 3 we saw the church is to have clear thinking about spiritual gifts. In verses 4-5 we considered how the church needs corporate or community thinking about spiritual gifts, seeking to discern together the various ways in which God has fit the body together. And now this morning we come to the final point, what I call the church's need to consistently practice spiritual gifts as seen in verses 6-8. If we are a people who are divinely gifted to declare the excellencies of God, we must know that we have been given everything need to carry that out as presented in part in Romans 12:6-8. Our call today is as a church to consistently practice these spiritual gifts. So let us examine what we have been given to fulfill our purpose as a church.

- 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)

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Our text begins with the words, **“Since we have gifts...”** Stopping right there, let me tell you that in the New Testament there are two key words used for spiritual gifts from God. The first one is “dorea” and always speaks of something freely given by God and of supernatural character; it is not typical or normal. The “dorea” is always used in reference to the character or quality of the gift, the wonder of the gift. We see this word used by Jesus in John 4:10 where He said to the Samaritan woman at the well,

10 Jesus answered and said to her, “If you knew the gift [dorea] of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water. . 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.”

Here Jesus speaks of “the gift of God” which is “living water” which is actually what, eternal life. Eternal life is called the gift of God, something freely given by God and in this context we are to see the superlative nature, that is, how much better and grand is the gift of God than anything that the Samaritan woman could accomplish with her measly water from Jacob’s old well.

The other key word used for “gifts” in the New Testament is “charismata” – a grace gift. The “charismata”, which is also freely or graciously given, speaks more to the enabling or empowering of that gift than simply the character of the gift. Not only is this the word we find in our text, but turn back to Romans 6:23 where we see something interesting. In Romans 6:23 we read,

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Again we are confronted with the gift of God and this gift of God, just like our John 4:10 passage is eternal life. Only Paul does not use the word “dorea” which would emphasize the overwhelming quality of the gift, but uses the word “charismata” emphasizing what the gift enables a person to do. Understood this way, we could say that the wages of sin, the efforts or enabling of our own flesh results in what...in death. Sin enables us to death, but the free “charismata” of God, the free enabling or work of God is eternal life to those who are in Christ Jesus our Lord. In John 4:10, Jesus speaks of the superior quality of the gift of eternal life that God gives in comparison to the efforts of the Samaritans to work for their salvation or worship of God. And in Romans 6:23 Paul speaks of the truth that God, by His free goodness, enables us to possess eternal life as we believe in Christ.

By way of example: let’s say that you and I are sitting at a table talking. And out of the blue, I take out my check book and say, I am writing you a check for \$100,000 dollars and I hand it to you. I did not give you the check because you told me you had a debt to be paid, or because of any declared need, it was just a free gift. That is a “dorea” – and speaks of the superior quality of the gift. I don’t necessarily know how you might use the money, for that was not discussed, but it is freely given for your use. Now if we were sitting at the table and we were discussing a business deal and you needed \$100,000 dollars to get the business going – if I then wrote you that same \$100,000 check and freely gave it to you, enabling you to start the business, this is a “charismata” – a grace gift that enables you to perform the task. Salvation is both a “dorea” – a gift of surpassing quality and a “charismata” – a gift that according to Roman 6:23, enables us to possess and anticipate eternal life.

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In Romans 12:6-8, we are presented with a partial list of spiritual gifts, of "charismatas" meaning that what we see here are those freely given divine enablements that are intended to benefit and unify the body of Christ, the church. And notice what Paul says, "since we have gifts..." This is in the present tense. Each one has at least one gift, one charismata, one divine enablement given by which you, in partnership with the rest of the body, have been commissioned to declare to both believers and unbelievers, the excellencies of God. In 1 Corinthians 1:4-7 Paul reminds the believers at that church,

4 I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, 5 that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, 6 even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, 7 so that you are not lacking in any gift [charismata – divine enablement], awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

I believe that our church, regardless of its size, is not lacking in any gift needed at this time. I believe that each of us here who is genuinely born again has something to contribute, and in fact, as seen in our Romans 12 text, must contribute to the benefit of the body and to the glory of God. "Since we all have gifts." But then note that while we all possess the same "charismata" or gift of salvation, we all possess what the New Testament calls the gift of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, we also have gifts that **"differ according to the grace given to us..."** Let us never forget that it is God that has allotted to each of us a **"measure of faith"** and by His grace has gifted each one. This is an important truth – namely that spiritual gifts have nothing to do with personal ambition. We are not presented with a "wish" list from which we make a choice and then work for that gift. The gift(s) we have received have been sovereignly bestowed by God's grace and God's own determination. Whether you know it or not, if you are a believer, you already have at least one gift. And remember that God not only graces you with that gift but also gives you the faith to exercise that gift. To not to use your gift, or to complain that your gift is not what you want, or that it is beyond your abilities is to question the sovereign will of God. According to 1 Corinthians 12:7 and 11, it is God who has determined what gift or gifts you have for the common good of the body. Every gift is meant to contribute to the overall well being of the body. Not one gift is to be diminished but rather exercised fully.

Notice how verses 6-8 are arranged to excite in us the practice of these gifts. To read and see it another way:

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;
if service — in his serving;
or he who teaches — in his teaching;
or he who exhorts — in his exhortation;
he who gives — with liberality;
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The beginning of verse six is simply the tie in with what Paul said in verse 3-5, if we have right thinking about the spiritual gifts as individuals and as a church, then, beginning with the last have of verse 6 on into verse 8, fully practice those gifts. I also take the end of verse six as setting up two major categories of spiritual gifts. First, there are the spoken gifts, called "prophecy" – which does not speak of foretelling the future but rather with the proclamation of spiritual truth. The second category includes the serving gifts, gifts of service and of helps. We see Peter make a similar distinction between the gifts in 1 Peter 4:10-11;

10 As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. 11 Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Looking back at Romans 12:6-8 then; the end of verse 7 and beginning of verse 8 reveal the gifts of teaching and exhorting, which would be specialized gifts of prophecy or spoken gifts, while the remaining gifts of giving, leading and showing mercy would fall under the category of serving gifts.

Let us look at some aspects of these gifts. Notice that the gift of prophecy and therefore of teaching and exhortation, come with a major word of warning. These gifts are to be exercised **"according to the proportion of his faith."** From this we would conclude that Paul is simply saying, "keep within the boundaries of the revealed Word of God." This could be translated, "according to the proportion of the faith" meaning that it seeks to stay within the guidelines of both God's Word and God's will. We are to be content with the circumstances in which we have the opportunity to exercise the spoken gifts.

This statement could also mean that these spoken gifts are to be "in agreement with," the faith. The idea is that whatever is spoken is never to contradict or undermine the Scriptures. All who speak are to do so in a way completely consistent with Scripture. Paul seems to be saying the same thing to the Corinthians when he writes in 1 Corinthians 4:6

Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.

The danger identified here is of exceeding or of going beyond "what is written." Such an exercise is called arrogance and it is the very thing Paul is warning us about here in Romans 12.

Even the gifts of service are to be exercised accordingly, done with maximum effort as we like to say to the youth group. When you have one of the service gifts, you are to concern yourself with fully carrying out that service. Our temptation is to sit back and to critique or correct our brothers and sisters works of service rather than to be fully carrying out our own. We can find ourselves saying things like, "Well, if I were to run the nursery, or if I were to do the music, or if I were to plan this event, then I would have...." To be sure, there is a time and place for constructive criticism, but no one who is not actively engaged in service has that right. Remember that verse 6 says that "each of us is to exercise them [our own gifts] accordingly."

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So, we have these two overall categories of gifts, “prophecy” – of proclaiming the message and truth of God; and “service” – of helping, aiding, serving one another with a specific gift. Then in verses 7b and 8a Paul delineates the speaking gifts of teaching and exhorting. The one with the gift of teaching should devote himself to teaching. The one with the gift of exhortation is to devote himself to exhortation.

The gift of teaching is simply the special ability to interpret and present God’s truth understandably. The gift of exhortation is the special ability to come along side another to advise, plead with, encourage, warn strengthen and/or comfort. To have the gift of exhortation does not mean that person does all of those, but at least one or more by the grace of God for the benefit of the church. Those who teach, are to teach and keep teaching. Those who exhort are to exhort and keep exhorting. The call is to stick with it, not to give up, not to stop

The gift of giving does not imply that only those with this gift are to give to the benefit of the body. We are all called to give of time and resources. But there is a spiritual gift that enables a person to share or impart that which is his own in a fashion that is attributed to godliness. The call for this person is to give “with liberality” or “generously.” If you are ready from the NASB, you might notice the marginal reading is that the one who gives is to do so “with simplicity.” The idea seems to be that such giving is to be with unmixed motives. Giving is to be generous and sacrificial. The generous giver must be wary of having any ulterior motives, perhaps to be seen or to be esteemed. Remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. They gave with mixed motives and thus became deceptive and dishonest. They were not as generous as they wished to appear. Such a giver is to give to the glory of God and for the benefit of the recipient, not for his own gain.

The gift of leading, to stand before others with the intent to guide and direct, comes with the exhortation to be done “with diligence.” Unlike the world leadership where the leader generally leads to enhance his own position, the spiritual leader is not seeking to promote himself. Spiritual leadership is servant leadership. Servant leadership finds its rewards more often in the knowledge of obedience to God rather than grand praise from men. The servant leader is to be diligent, that is, he is to devote maximum effort in serving others in a way that guides and directs them to follow hard after Christ. I see the call to diligence as a warning against half-hearted leadership. If you are called to lead in some area of the church, do it with diligence.

The final gift we will look at from our text is that of mercy. The gift of mercy is the divine ability to demonstrate sympathy for another in their circumstance as well as having the resources by which to comfort that person. It is interesting that the warning here is to show mercy with “cheerfulness” or gladness. Oftentimes, one who is in need of mercy is not the most pleasant person to be around. Sometimes they are even slow to show any gratitude for any measure of mercy shown to them. And so the temptation will be for the one who has this gift to become cynical and hard. Remember that spiritual gifts are grace gifts from God, they are to reveal the grace of God in our lives.

We must be careful that whether we have spoken gifts or service gifts that we always seek to devote ourselves entirely to what we are gifted to do. We must also be careful never to exercise our gifts in a manner that is inconsistent with the grace of God, remembering that our gifts are sovereignly given by God to benefit the whole church and to glorify Him.

As we close, let me just ask you a few questions that result from looking at these verses. Knowing that our text is addressing genuine believers who have been divinely gifted to benefit the

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church, let me ask you if you have first received God's gift of eternal life by acknowledging yourself to be a sinner and of Christ having died for your sins on the cross and that by believing this knowing that God will change your heart and cause you to pursue a life of Christlikeness? Are you truly born again? You see, if you are not, then the topic of spiritual gifts is a mute point because until you are saved, you have no spiritual gift. You may have wonderful natural abilities that you or other mistake for spiritual gifts, but unless you know you are saved, you are simply fooling yourself and others and are ultimately harming yourself and the church.

The next question I would ask is this, are you pursuing the practice of your spiritual gift for the glory of God and the benefit of the church. Do you know your gift or gifts? If you do, is your gift used only when convenient or do you consistently seek to use it for the common good of the body. Remember that Romans 12:1 speaks of offering ourselves as living sacrifices. And so, out of gratitude to the mercies of God, are you pursuing sacrificially to serve God by serving others by means of the spiritual gift(s) God has given you? If you do not know your spiritual gift, your divine stewardship, your measure of faith, your place of service in and to the local body, why not?

And finally, how connected are you to a local church and to the broader body of Christ so that your gift may benefit others and so that you may draw from the strengths and gifts of others? Remember that God does approve of maverick Christians and spiritual gifts are not given so that we may set ourselves above or apart from the rest of the body. Our spiritual gifts remind us that we are interdependent upon one another. Do you see and experience this? How? If not, why not? What are you doing in obedience to this passage to fulfill your responsibilities to the body of Christ?

Beloved, spiritual gifts are not intended to be a mystery but are given to be employed in serving one another. God does not hide the gifts. It is time to know and practice the gifts. Let us all look for needs within the body and seek to meet them. When you see someone struggling with something or notice something that needs to be done, then seek to serve in that area. Remember that spiritual gifts are given in order to meet the needs of others and how many of those others have needs? All of them. Let us pray for eyes to see those needs for obedient hearts to respond to them by God's grace and power. Let us strive to look less like modern America and more like the church, divinely gifted people commissioned to declare the excellencies of God.

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Soli Deo Gloria

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