



Grace and Unity in the Church

Romans 12:3-8

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Good morning. If you have your Bibles with you, I would invite you to turn to the book of Romans, chapter 12. We're going to be looking at verses 3-8 both this week and next week. There's sufficient amount of material for us to be in this text for two weeks. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 12, beginning at 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. 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.

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.”

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we pray this morning that you would make your Word open to us. By the power of your Holy Spirit, illuminate our eyes, our minds, and our hearts, that we might see the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of the church, Lord over all, and that we might serve him joyfully and gladly. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We are continuing to look this morning at Romans, chapter 12, where Paul moves from explaining the doctrine of who we are in Christ to encouragements of how we should live because we are in Christ. Now that doesn't mean Paul is through teaching, but it does mean Paul's emphasis has changed. He will continue to remind us and tell us who we are in Christ, but now his teaching will be more by way of a reminder so we can apply it to our lives.

This chapter is about sanctification; that is, how we are to live as Christians. Paul started with the general theme of our conduct...our motives, our general practice, and the principles that guide us in our conduct. He did this in verses 1-2. Now the rest of this chapter can be divided into two sections. Verses 3-8 are about how the Christian relates to others in the church, especially in the exercise of gifts in the church. Then verses 9-21 are about the relationship the Christian has to others, both inside and outside the church. We'll look at that section in some detail over several weeks.

Now we turn to the Christian in the church and the exercise of gifts. This week, we will look at the gifts in the church in general, and then next week, we will look at some of the gifts in particular themselves. I would like us to see three general principles Paul calls us to with respect to the exercise of gifts within the church.

First, we are called to *acknowledge grace*, to understand and to see that all we have comes from the grace of God. Secondly, we are called to *think soberly*, to have a proper assessment of ourselves and others and of the gifts we exercise and the necessity of gifts in the church. Then, thirdly, we are to *recognize unity*, that even in the diversity of gifts there is a unity in the body of Christ. There is one body of Christ. Acknowledge grace, think soberly, and recognize unity.

Acknowledge Grace

Let's start as Paul teaches us about grace. Our text begins in verse 3. "For by the grace [of God] given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think..." The very first thing Paul begins with is a description of the source of gifts in the church: the grace of God. It is grace that gives gifts. We must have grace in order to have gifts. Make no mistake; it is grace that is primary, not gifts.

Now why does Paul do this? Why doesn't Paul start by listing off all of the gifts that are in the church and then describing what they are and then afterward going to the source. Isn't that often what *we* want? To know what the gifts are and what my particular gift is? Perhaps you are familiar with this as we look at the spiritual gifts Christians exercise in the church. Often, the place where we begin is with some kind of spiritual gift inventory, a test, to ask you what gifts you have.

The irony is that when we do that, we claim our own gifts. We don't acknowledge that they come from the grace of God, because, in truth, the only way for us to know what our gifts are is when others point them out in us. We don't get to choose our own gifts. That's because they come from God. There is an important reason to start with grace with Paul. Paul knows gifts can lead to pride if we are not careful.

Perhaps nothing in the church has a tendency more toward boasting, division, and quarrels than our gifts in the church. We can boast in our gifts. We compare our gifts to others. We argue about which are more important in the church. So Paul starts out to destroy our boasting and our pride. Now, what is Paul's method for doing this? Paul is consistent in his method on this subject. What he tells the Romans here in chapter 12 is basically the same thing he tells the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 12.

He describes using the same illustration, even, as we'll see in just a bit: that of the body. But Paul also does what he so often takes up. He starts with himself, and in this he displays both his authority to speak on the subject and his humility. Let's begin by looking at Paul's authority to speak on the subject of gifts coming from grace.

As we look at verse 3, you must understand that the very first word in this verse in the Greek is *I say*. Now it's not a bad translation once again. Our translators translate it, and for ease of English, they translate it a few words down, but for emphasis, we must understand that Paul begins his sentence saying, "I say..." The second word he uses is *for*. We've seen Paul use this word *for* on previous occasions. It is a reminder that he is continuing a logical argument to convince us of the truth from God's Word.

Verse 3 follows formally on to verses 1 and 2. What Paul has been saying generally must be taken into account. This is an application of the general principle of Christian living that is found in verses 1 and 2. Now you remember

what those general principles were: first, that we are to live for God as living sacrifices; second, that we cannot be conformed to the world, but that we, thirdly, must be transformed by the renewing of our mind by the Holy Spirit.

Now how do we do that in the church? That's what Paul is telling us. We cannot ignore him. He is speaking with the authority of an inspired apostle. This is not a suggestion Paul brings to us. He says, "I say" in an authoritative and commanding manner. So when Paul speaks of the grace that is given to him, he speaks in an authoritative fashion. He is referring specifically here to the grace of apostleship, the grace of the ministry he has. The grace he has been given *is* his authority. It doesn't lessen his authority. The grace God gives to Paul establishes his authority.

Paul opens up the book of Romans in chapter 1, verse 5, describing this. He says it is through Jesus Christ that we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith. Some even translate this the grace *of* apostleship. The point is that Paul has been given an apostolic authority by God. He has not assumed it on his own. God has given that to him, and the reason he has given it to Paul is to teach God's people, to explain to them about the grace of God.

Paul ends the book of Romans on a similar note. In chapter 15, verse 15, he says, "But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder because of the grace given me by God." What Paul is saying as he wraps up this letter is "Everywhere that I have spoken, if you think I've spoken harshly or sharply or directly or boldly, it's because of the grace that has been given to me by God."

The interesting thing is Paul does not begin with his accomplishments. He doesn't say, "I say to you...I, who sat at the feet of Gamaliel, who was the best student of Judaism ever." He doesn't say, "I say to you, the writer of more than half the New Testament." He doesn't say, "I say to you, missionary extraordinaire." No. He begins with the grace God has given to him. This is important for us to see. We have to listen to Paul, and when we see his humility, it's even more significant because of the authority he has been given. Grace gives gifts, starting with Paul.

The next thing we see is Paul's humility. There is an obvious humility in Paul. The words *I say* are followed by the phrase *by the grace given to me*. It amazed Paul that he had been given such authority. Everything Paul had was the result of undeserved grace. Paul is ensuring us that grace is available for all of us, and he reminds us that that grace first came to *him*. He tells us that boasting and self-satisfaction are contrary to a Christian profession.

This is what Paul said in Romans, chapter 3, verse 27. "What has become of boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By the law of works? No, but by the law of faith." You remember in chapter 11 when Paul described to us what grace is. By its nature, grace comes from without us, and we cannot claim anything from it. He says in chapter 11, verse 6, "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace." He's reminding us what grace is.

There's a very interesting phenomenon in the life of Paul. For most of us, as we continue down the road of life, whether it is in our careers or our schooling or even our relationships with others, the more we are involved in doing something, the more self-assured we are, the better we think we are at something, the more confident we become, the readier we are with advice to others, the more we want others to see that we have it all together.

The interesting phenomenon with the apostle Paul is the more he knows about himself and the more he knows about the grace of God the humbler he becomes. There is a sort of chain in the Scriptures of the way Paul refers to himself. It begins early in his ministry as he writes his first letter to the Corinthians. In chapter 15, that famous chapter on the resurrection, he says in verse 9, describing himself, "For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

Hear what Paul is saying here. "I'm the least of the apostles, but I'm still an apostle. There aren't many apostles around here. There are only twelve of us. I'm one of them. I may be the least of them, as one born out of time, but I still am an apostle." Then later on in his ministry he writes to the church at Ephesus in chapter 3, verse 8. He says, "To me, I am the very least of all the saints." So Paul has moved from the least of the apostles to now being the least of the saints.

Then in the very last days of his life, as he writes a letter to his son in the faith, Timothy, in 1 Timothy 1, he says, "This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost." Do you hear that progression, if we can call it that? From the least of the apostles to the least of the saints to the chief of sinners. That's because Paul saw the grace of God, and he saw how much he needed the grace of God.

This is absolutely countercultural. In Paul's day, no one talked about their weaknesses. No one was humble. Instead, what everyone did was they rattled off all of their achievements so they could gain a hearing with other people. Now that shouldn't surprise you, and it shouldn't be news, because that's exactly the case today.

Think about politics and politicians. How do they speak? Have you ever heard a politician say, "Vote for me because I'm not really sure I'm qualified for the office"? No. What they say is, "I'm the only person on the face of the earth qualified for this. You have to vote for me." Think about sports. Does anyone ever say, "Well, you know, I just try to play hard, and I try to support the team"? No. They say, "I'm the best this game has ever seen. I'm the goat. You need to look at me. I know exactly what I'm doing, and I need to be paid more than anybody else." That's what they say.

How about academia? People tell you all they know. Have you ever had someone come up to you and say, "Well, you really can't have this conversation with me, because I have a PhD and you don't," as if somehow those three letters magically make everything they say true? That's what people do. Perhaps the best example of this... I'll date myself a little bit. When I was a young man, one of the most famous athletes in all of America was Muhammad Ali.

If you know Muhammad Ali, you already know what I'm going to say, because it was Muhammad's tagline. He would always say, "I am the greatest," and he would say, "There's no one ever been as good as me. No one ever *will* be. I am the greatest." That's how our society and culture views themselves. Humility is seen as a weakness, but not so for Paul. Paul is humble.

But it's not just *Paul* being humble. He's not the only one who has been the recipient of this kind of grace. Look at what Paul says. "For by the grace given to me I say to *everyone* among you..." That includes all people. Everyone

Paul is talking to at Rome is included in this statement. Paul is speaking to all of them. This tells us two important things.

First, that everyone has these gifts Paul is describing. Paul could have very well used a very appropriate word *most* or *several* or *some* of you, but he chose not to. He specifically uses the word *all*. All have these gifts. Why is that? Because it is the Lord who assigns these gifts, we see at the end of verse 3. God has assigned the gifts, and God does this according to *his* will and *his* purpose, not ours.

It is not because he thinks we would be best suited to the task that he gives us a gift. That is what Paul means when he says "according to the measure of faith." We are to have a sober judgment about these gifts, recognizing by faith that they are the result of grace. There is an old saying that is well worth remembering. "God does not call the equipped; God equips the called." All of the emphasis is on the work of God giving gifts for the benefit of his church.

Secondly, we see from this word *everyone* that all are vulnerable to pride because of that. If Paul was given such grace and such authority that he was amazed by it, how much more should we be amazed by the grace given to us who have not accomplished a fraction of what Paul has? No gift can be exercised apart from faith. We are to look to God as the giver of the gift.

Think Soberly

So what are you to do, then, to resist pride and to properly view your gifts? Paul gives us some specifics here. He tells us that we are to think soberly, and these specifics are with respect to being transformed by the renewing of your mind. What you are to do, Paul says, is you are to think. You are to think biblically, and you are to think specifically about who you are in Christ.

In verse 3, Paul tells us four times to think. There is no way you can miss it. Paul says, "You ought not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober thinking." It's the same word. The verb is used four times in one short sentence. The differing nuance of translation is twice Paul puts a preposition on the same verb to give it an additional emphasis, but the point cannot be missed. Paul wants you all to think. He tells us over and over again.

So, he starts by telling you not to think more highly of yourself than you ought. This word is interesting. There is a preposition put on this verb *to think*, and the preposition in the Greek is one you're familiar with in English. It is *hyper*. You know what it means to be hyper, right? If I say to you, "That boy is a very active boy," you have a picture in your mind of what that means. If I say to you, "That boy is a hyperactive boy," you start to say, "Honey, put the china away. Lock up the glasses and the dishes. We don't know where he's going to go, what he's going to do, what he's going to touch. He's a bundle of energy."

It means the same thing in the Greek. Paul tells you not to think hyperly, not to think more of yourself, not to think too highly of yourself, not to spend too much time thinking about yourself. We don't need to wonder what the problem is for us and for the Romans. Paul comes right out and says it. He says it's pride. As soon as we begin

to think about our gifts, we tend to puff ourselves up. We tend to congratulate ourselves, and we tend to become self-important.

We could easily see that this was happening at Rome. It would have been the source of division and struggle. It would have limited the usefulness of the gifts they had. Now how would we know this? It's because the church at Rome were Christians. They were redeemed sinners. They were just like us. We have that same tendency, don't we? Don't you see it all the time in the church? The blessings God gives to you lead to pride and to comparisons.

I'm your pastor, and I have this same temptation. I just experienced it at our general assembly. I have to tell you that I am very good at what I do. I am amongst the best handful of men in working at the assembly, and I had plenty of people come up to me and tell me how great I was at assembly. What that does is that starts a war in my soul, because I want to know that *everyone knows* how good I am. I want them to acknowledge it. I want to get credit for it. More than that, *I* want to take the credit because of *my* skill, *my* work, *my* mind, not by the grace of God.

The same is true for you. Anything you are good at can lead to pride, can lead to you thinking it is you who is responsible rather than the grace of God. What, then, is the solution for you and for me? Paul says it is to think with sober judgment. That means to be mindful that everything you have is a gift of God. It means to think in a way that is balanced, rational, not covered by impulses.

Now, when Paul says to think soberly or to use sober judgment, he is not primarily telling us to avoid strong drink, not to be drunk when we're thinking, but he *is* using a picture that helps us. Think about someone you've seen or known who has been drunk. What do they look like? How do they act? They're completely imbalanced. They can't even stand up. They've lost all sense of propriety. They say things they would never say if they were sober. More than that, they're given to extreme exaggeration.

Have you ever gone up to someone who's drunk who maybe has said he's hungry, and you bring him a piece of bread and put some peanut butter on it and hand it to him and say, "Here, eat this," and he starts to eat it and says, "You are the best cook ever; I have never eaten anything as good as this in my life"? You're sitting there just shaking your head, because you know it's improper thinking that's coming out here. It's an exaggeration.

You see, when we are not thinking soberly, we are prone to exaggerate ourselves and our gifts in the same way. Brothers and sisters, when you exaggerate your own gifts in the church, you are as embarrassing as someone who is drunk. We need to look to the grace of God. To think soberly is to be in your right mind. This is the same word that is used to describe the demoniac when he has been healed by Jesus in Mark 5. After he has been healed, they come and they see him. He is sitting in his right mind.

Mark tells us he is sitting, thinking soberly. It's the same word. It is the way in which we think in which we know that whatever way we differ from someone else is solely due to the grace of God. Paul puts it *this* way in 1 Corinthians 4. He says, "For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, then why do you boast as if you didn't receive it?" This is what Paul is telling us. We're to think soberly, not high-minded.

There's another error we must also resist: false humility. There are times when we are so concerned about others seeing pride in us that we insist on a false sense of humility. We tell others how humble we are. We act as humble as we can before them so they will notice it. A friend of mine has a good phrase about this. He says, "Oh, he's awfully proud of his humility."

We say things always talking down about ourselves. We say things like, "Oh, I'm unimportant. I can do nothing." It's a false humility, though, because usually what is at the root of it is something like *this*. We say, "Oh, I wish I knew the Bible better. I don't know the Bible at all." You can almost count the beats...one, two, three...where we're waiting for someone to say, "Oh, no. You are a brilliant Bible scholar. I love listening to you talk about the Bible."

"Oh, okay."

"Well, you know, I'm just not good with people. I don't have the gift of being with people."

"Oh, of course not. No, you are the best with people."

You see, we have this false sense of humility so that someone else can pump us up. It's actually related to this sense of pride. It's just better masked. If we don't want to toot our *own* horn, we're glad to cue it up, hand it to someone, and tell them where to breathe so they can toot our horn *for* us.

People who have this kind of false humility are also constantly comparing themselves to others. Just as those who think hyper of themselves think of others and compare themselves so they can be on the top, so *these* who think falsely humbly are constantly comparing themselves to others, except for they come out on the bottom, but the principle is the same. They're always comparing themselves to others.

This kind of false humility denies the power and the purpose of God, because God gives gifts to all, Paul says...*everyone*. All of us should think with sober judgment. No matter what your gifts are, you share a common identity in Christ with all other Christians. You are important. God has a purpose for you. You must have God's assessment of your worth and your gifts, not your false assessment.

Now what does that mean for you today? It means you are meant to serve. You cannot just sit on the sidelines. You cannot just float in and out of church. God has given you gifts to exercise in his body. I am sure of it. The Bible tells me so. I don't need a test for you to take. I don't need a success rate chart. Each and every one of you has a gift you should be exercising in the church.

You may need to find out what your gift is, but the only way you can do that is by serving, by giving yourself so others can help assess your gifts. The way we determine our gifts is we serve others, and they come alongside us and tell us they see these gifts in us. You don't get to choose your own gifts, you don't get to designate your own gifts, because the gifts are there to serve others. That is the test.

Recognize Unity

Now let's talk briefly about a third thing Paul is saying. We are to recognize that God has given grace to each one of us. That includes me. That includes everyone else around me. That includes those I struggle to love in the church. We must recognize the unity God has given to his church, the unity that is in the church through the diversity of gifts. Our gifts need not be the same.

You need to have a sober, proper estimation of your gifts and the gifts of others around you. Why is that? Why is Paul stressing this so much? Because it leads us to this third point of unity. We have to recognize that God gives gifts to believers to encourage their unity in Christ. God has intentionally left you with a lack. He has intentionally made you so you are not self-sufficient. You do not have every gift.

This is intentional on God's part. Why? Because the result of that is you need others who have also been given an intentional lack. Why? Because they need *you*. There is a unity that comes from the diversity of gifts. If we all had the same gifts, and if we all had the full complement of gifts, we would not need each other. God has done this intentionally, and Paul uses the illustration of the body to explain this to us.

Now, we have to take this illustration to heart, because it's so familiar that our tendency is not to think much about it, but it is an important illustration. He says in verse 4, "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 of one another." We are members of Christ's body. It is not *our* body. It is not the *church's* body. It is *Christ's*.

Therefore, we have no right to say we do not belong to each other. Jesus is the head and the possessor of the body. You are not the possessor of your own gifts. You are not the possessor of your own self. You belong to Jesus, and Jesus has given you to his church, just as he has given every other believer to his church. There is an organic unity to the body, and by that I mean the body is not just a collection of parts. There is a vital relationship between all of the parts of the body.

I imagine that none of you got up this morning and said, "I don't really think I'm going to need my left arm. I'm just going to leave it at home. I'm not really sure I need my liver. I'll just leave it on the dresser, and I'll come pick it up later." Did you? Well, of course not, because the body is a whole where all of the parts work together. They're not interchangeable. They're not dispensable. The body as a whole is actually more important than all of the parts.

This is helpful for us to see, because it's true in the church. The church is more important than its parts. That doesn't mean the parts are unimportant. That's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is that the body gives the parts their importance. It is the Lord who adds to the church. We do not make ourselves a part of the body. It is something that is done *to* us, yet there is a variety to this unity.

This is obvious in the physical body. That's why the physical body is such a good illustration for Paul to use. The parts of the body perform many different functions. None of them are identical. So what does that mean? That means we *should* look different. We should not try to look the same as everyone else. This is the great problem of the world. It is the madness that has taken over our modern society. They have equated equality with sameness, that everything must be the same, all distinctions must be flattened out.

This is what is at the heart of all the gender controversies. The world has determined the only way men and women can be equal is if they are exactly the same and there are no males, no females, only generic people. That's the only way they could be equal. But that's not true. God tells us there is a wonderful variety and distinctness to the body. At the same time, this variety doesn't undercut the unity of the body.

Now, this can be a challenge for us in the Reformed world. Oftentimes, we think there is only one way to serve the Lord, or at least there is one *best* way, and if we're not gifted in that way, then we either try to exercise gifts we don't have or we sit on the sidelines and think we're unimportant. God doesn't want that. Our gifts are not meant to be the same. Our unity in Christ is seen in the variety he has given to us.

Finally, because we are members of Christ's body, we need to serve each other. You belong to each other. You are not your own. You are Christ's, and he has given you to each other. Paul says this in verse 5. "...so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." That means we are members belonging to each other. That's what Paul is saying there. Individually, we belong to each other, and differences don't mean disunity, because we live in a shared fellowship that is grounded in Jesus Christ.

Our union with Christ brings us into communion with each other, and it is not optional. That's what Paul is saying our gifts are for. So often, we see our gifts as being for us, so we can have the pleasure and encouragement of exercising our gifts. We're thankful to the Lord for what he has done for *us* in giving us gifts, but Paul says that's not the case. We don't have the same function, because we are to serve others. We are given gifts for others. Because they don't have that gift, because they don't have that function, we are to exercise ours for their benefit.

We need to hear this in the church. We all want to do certain things, but these functions...*all* of them...are essential to the work of the body, with all of its parts supporting the others. When one part fails, it affects all, even, as Paul puts it, the lesser known or desirable parts of the body. Could you imagine what your life would be like if your digestive system never worked? Now if we were having some kind of quiz, something on Facebook where they ask you, "What organ are you?" you would fill it out, and you would want to get "heart" or "brain" or maybe "lungs."

If you filled it out and got "You are the lower intestine," you would not be very happy. "You are the colon." But let me tell you, if your lower intestine doesn't work, you're going to die. Every part of the body is absolutely fundamentally necessary to the body. Think about that in the church. We need evangelists. We need teachers, but we also need encouragers. We need administrators. We need generous givers. We need mercy ministers. No church can function without a wide variety of gifts.

In conclusion, God has given you grace in Christ to be a part of the body of Christ. In that grace, he has given you gifts for service. The Lord wants you to think soberly about those gifts. Do not let gifts puff you up or make you proud, but don't think and act as if you have been passed over, as if you are not valuable, as if you can be a spectator in the church.

The Lord has given a wide variety of gifts to his people because all are needed, all are important, all are a part of his plan to build the church. You belong to each other. That means you do not get an option to use your gifts and serve others. You *must* do so. It is what Jesus is calling you to.