



Gifts for Service

Romans 12:3-8

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Now if you have your Bibles with you, I would encourage you to open them up to the book of Romans, the twelfth chapter, as we look again this morning at Romans, chapter 12, verses 3-8. We looked at this text last week, and we're going to look at it again this week. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant. Romans 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. O Lord our God, we pray that you would use your Word this morning, that by the power of your Holy Spirit you would bring your Word to bear on our lives, that you would open our eyes so we might see wonderful things in your Word, that you would open our hearts that we would be changed by the truth and grace of your Word. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We come this week to the same text we looked at last week, Romans 12:3-8. Last week we looked at the gifts Paul was describing in general. We saw that Paul entered into this discussion of gifts because he wanted to show Christians how to relate to one another in the church. A critical element in this discussion to have a proper frame of mind about the gifts is to think soberly, Paul says.

Paul warned us not to think too highly of ourselves and also not to have a kind of false humility. Finally, we saw that the gifts are to serve unity in the church, not division. We have to have these things in mind as we get to the specifics. As we come to the specifics of the gifts this morning, I would like us to see three things.

First, *the context for the gifts*, the context that we receive the gifts from the Lord. Second, *gifts for understanding*. Paul lists several gifts that are useful for aiding our understanding. And then third, *gifts for community*. Paul lists several specific gifts that are useful in the church for building up and sustaining community. The context for the gifts, gifts for understanding, and gifts for community.

The Context for the Gifts

As we begin here this morning, as we think about the specific gifts, we must understand that they come in a context. The gifts do not just appear out of nowhere. They come to us, rather, with a purpose. So, let's start by looking first at what is common to all gifts. Three things Paul shows us in our text, I believe. First, that *the gifts come from the Lord*; second, that *the gifts are different*; and then third, that *the gifts are to be used*. These three elements are found in each of the specific gifts.

In verse 6, Paul starts to list the gifts. He lists seven in all here. This list is not meant to be exhaustive. We know this for a fact, because in 1 Corinthians 12, for example, Paul gives another listing of gifts, some of which overlap with this gift, but there are other gifts included in *that* list that are not included here in Romans 12. So this list cannot be an end-all, be-all of spiritual gifts. It is rather, instead, an illustration of gifts that Paul is using to highlight his purpose here.

This should set our minds properly from the outset with respect to the gifts. Paul is not describing these gifts so we can take a list home and then decide which of the gifts we want or which of them we have. No. He is describing these gifts to prove his general point about the purpose and the provision of the gifts. We need to turn our thinking upside down. So often we start with the individual, specific gifts. We want to know what they are, what they look like, and if we have them.

What Paul has done here is list specifics, not so that we might have a checklist but, rather, so he can show us the truth of his main, overarching point. Before Paul even gets to the specifics, he begins like *this* in verse 6: "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them..." The first verb Paul uses assumes that believers have gifts. He begins with the verb to *have*. He says, "Having gifts..." This assumes that the believer has a gift. He doesn't say, "If you have a gift..." or "If you *want* a gift..." No. He says, "You *have* a gift. Let's start there."

Now this should raise a question in our minds. How do we have these gifts? How do we come to possess them? The answer, we will see, is that the gifts come to us from the Lord. There are three clues in our text that point to this. The first is that we have the gifts according to grace. We have seen Paul use the word *grace* before. As a matter of fact, he uses *grace* 21 times in the book of Romans. In each instance, he is talking about the unmerited favor of God, God's favor that is shown to us that we do not deserve.

Now grace brings different things to us. Grace brings forgiveness, justification, freedom from works, but in every instance, grace comes from God. As soon as we see that here, as soon as we see Paul talking about grace, we have to be aware that these gifts are not natural, that they do not originate with us. They come from God. Further, we have to remember that we did not earn them. They come by grace, the definition of which is that we do not deserve them.

That brings us to the second clue Paul provides: the word *given*. Paul says, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace *given* to us..." The word *given* here is a participle that modifies the word *grace*. It is grace that is given first. The grace is given. By receiving the *grace* of God, we can then receive the *gift* of God, but grace is what is primary.

Grace comes to us first from God. This is important to recognize. God gives us gifts. He gives them because he gives us grace. Gifts follow in the wake of grace. That is what God is doing here. He is blessing his people with grace, and the gifts are a manifestation of that grace. They are not to be considered apart from grace. They are a type of grace that comes to us.

The final clue Paul provides is in the word *gift* itself. Now you may wonder, "How is that so? How does the word *gift* point to God? Couldn't it be a gift from someone else? Couldn't it be *my* gift to bring to the church?" Well, the word *gift* is a word you have likely heard before. In the Greek it is *charismata*. We get our term *charismatic* from it.

Paul is telling you that you have charismatic things. Now here is a first for you. You have a Presbyterian pastor telling you that you are charismatic, but let's be clear about what that means. The word *charismata* comes from a root word *charis*. Now what does this word *charis* mean? Well, it means grace. So the word *gift* itself points us back to the Giver, to the grace of God. Paul is telling you the very definition of gift is that it is a thing of grace. It comes from the Lord. There is no getting around that.

Now, all of this is important to understand because we will only properly use and see the gifts of others around us if we know they come from God. It is not about us. It is never about us in the Christian life or in the church. It is always about the Lord. Specifically, about the Lord Jesus Christ. In another passage about gifts, in Ephesians, chapter 4, we are specifically told that when Jesus ascended he gave gifts to his people. So, do you believe you have a gift? Know that it comes from Jesus. It's not natural. It's not yours. It comes from Jesus Christ.

Paul also tells us these gifts are not the same. Not everyone has the same gifts. He does this very matter-of-factly. He says, "Having gifts that *differ*..." This word places all the focus on the distinctness of the gifts, the differentness of the gifts. So much so that it is often used as a comparative adjective to show value, how something is more different from something else. It makes it more excellent. It's the way the book of Hebrews describes the differentness of Jesus Christ; that is, his excellence.

Here it is not being used in a comparative way. It is simply pointing out that the gifts are not identical. Now, we talked some about this last week, that the body of Christ needs different gifts. There are different tasks to be done. There are different ways to minister, so God has designed different gifts. Paul uses this excellent illustration of the body to show this. The body would be a monstrosity if it only had one gift. What would the body be like if it were all an eye? How would it hear? Or if it were all an ear. How would it smell?

We can obviously understand the importance of the difference. Could you imagine if someone called you up and said, "I'd like to go out and meet you for dinner," and you went, and as you sat at the table there was just a giant eyeball sitting in the chair or a giant ear? By itself there's nothing wrong with an eye or an ear, but if that's all there was, it would be a monstrosity. It would not be a proper body. That's what Paul tells us here.

The same is true for the church. What would the church be like if everyone were an evangelist and no one were a teacher and no one was involved in mercy. What would the church be like if everyone was a leader but no one was

a giver? The body of Christ would be ineffective. You see, God has designed differing gifts for *his* purpose so *his* church succeeds and *his* kingdom grows.

This is a critical thing for us to realize, because far too often, the problem with the gifts is that we think we should all have the same gifts. We act as if it would be best if we were all the same, as if that would make us equal, but we saw last week that way of thinking is worldly, to equate equality with sameness. God never does that. When you think about your gifts, remember that God has intentionally made them to be different. That is his will and his purpose, and Paul tells us in verse 2 that God's will and purpose are good, acceptable, and perfect.

The third thing Paul tells us about these gifts is that they are to be used. The gifts not only come from the Lord, they're not only different, but they are to be used. We see this in two ways, one that is direct and one that is indirect. Paul wants us to understand that the gifts do not come to us by way of theory or in concept only. There's a direct statement in our text that's easy to see. "Let us use them." It's very direct and very straightforward. When you read that, there is nothing left to the imagination. It breaks into the application of the gifts. "Since you have them, use them."

Then Paul describes what they are in the context of their use. But the indirect statement Paul makes is actually more important than the direct statement. Why is that? Because the direct statement is not in the original Greek. It's supplied to us by the English translators. "Let us use them" is not in the original text. Why would the translators insert something into the Bible text? Well, this is something translators do all the time to help us understand what *is* there so we can understand the meaning.

It's because languages are not the same. Translating from one language to another is not like doing math. It is not as if we simply replace Greek words with English words and, therefore, we're able to understand the thought behind it. No. Sometimes we have to smooth out the language so it makes sense to us. So, what Paul is saying here in this text is actually very abrupt, very staccato. What he actually says is something like this: "If *this* gift, then do it. If *that* gift, do that. If the *other* gift, do that."

There aren't even verbs supplied. It's implied that we do these things, because Paul is being very straightforward, very abrupt. He's not pulling any punches. He's not mincing any words. He comes at us directly with this. In other words, to borrow a phrase from Nike, "Just do it." That's what Paul is saying. So, as Paul lists off these gifts, as we think about them, they are never to be considered apart from their use. They are not decorative in any fashion.

Perhaps you're like me and you go and visit someone, especially a relative who keeps a very prim and proper house, and you go into their washroom, and all of a sudden you're struck, because you have no idea how you can wash your hands. There are little soaps everywhere, but it's very clear that they're decorative. They're not to be used. There is a towel hanging on the rack, but it has exquisite embroidery on it, and it is very clear it is not for drying. It is a decoration.

You wonder, "What do I do here? How do I wash my hands? I can't use the soap. I can't dry them on that towel. What do I do?" That's not how the gifts of God work. They are to be used. If you consider the same illustration, the gifts of God are a large pump soap you can get all over your hands and get them as clean as you can. It's a deep,

thirsty towel you can dry your hands on. It's made to be useful. That's how the gifts are. Do not forget that. The gifts are always given for their use in the church.

Gifts for Understanding

Now let's turn to the gifts themselves. Paul lists seven gifts here: *prophecy, serving, teaching, exhorting, contributing, leading, and acts of mercy*. I want to deal with them under two headings. First, there are three gifts for *understanding*, that is, that lead to understanding or help our understanding. Then secondly, there are gifts for *community*, gifts that bolster community in the church.

I'm not going to deal specifically with how Paul says, "If service, then serving," because I believe that is a general gift that overarches the other gifts. The word for *service* here is the same word that's used for ministry in the Bible. In that gift, Paul is including all types of Christian ministry, both high and low. I think Paul includes it here to encapsulate the gifts he describes in 1 Corinthians and not here, and also other gifts he doesn't describe in either list. It is an overarching gift.

The first of the gifts of understanding is *prophecy*. If you have that gift, you are to use it in proportion to faith, or in proportion to *his* faith or in proportion to *the* faith, depending on the translation. So we have to answer two questions, then. First, what is prophecy, and second, what does "in proportion" mean? Let's look at the first question. What is prophecy?

I want you to start by getting the wrong answer out of your minds. If this were a quiz show and I asked that question, three-quarters of you would buzz in and say, "Well, prophecy is telling the future. That's what prophecy is." We talk about it all the time. I think even when we use the phrase with other people, "I'm no prophet..." When we talk about trends or the future, we'll say, "But I'm no prophet. I can't predict the future." That's what we think prophecy is.

In the Bible, future-telling was only a small part of what the prophet did. A better definition of prophecy is forth-telling. Not future-telling but forth-telling. The prophet stood in the place of another (namely God, in most instances) and spoke *for* him. We see this kind of definition of prophet in the beginning of the book of Exodus. You remember that God tells Moses that Aaron will be his prophet.

Now if we think about Aaron as a prophet as someone telling the future, we'll get all confused here, because Aaron never does that, but if we think about Aaron standing in the stead of Moses and speaking forth declaratively *for* Moses, then that makes perfect sense. This is true of all of the prophets in the Bible, even those we don't normally think of as prophets. The Bible calls Abraham a prophet. The Bible calls Moses a prophet. They spoke God's will to others.

The prophet was one who spoke under the immediate influence of God. What he spoke was to be treated as God's word, not his own word. The prophet was one who brought God's revelation to man. Now at the time that Paul was writing this, most of the New Testament was not written. The Bible was not completed, and it wouldn't be completed for many years. There were people in the church who were given revelation from God for the benefit of

the church, and they shared that with the church, and they did it in an orderly and specific way. Paul lays this out in 1 Corinthians 14.

We don't have time this morning to get into the details of that, but I want you to see and understand that this was direct revelation from God that was shared in the context of the church for the benefit of the people of God, but once the Bible was completed, we are told that the perfect has come. There's no more need for this kind of prophecy. When the Bible was completed, we have the final word in Jesus Christ. That's what Hebrews tells us in Hebrews 1, that God has spoken in this last time by his Son.

So this gift has ceased. The only sense in which it continues is in the way in which we refer to preaching God's Word as a type of prophecy, but even that is not revelatory. It's far better to think of preaching, in terms of the gifts here, as teaching or exhorting. What, then, is this "proportion to the faith"? There are two ways to take this phrase. When we say "our faith" in the English Standard Version, what is actually in the Greek text is the definite article *the* and the word *faith*.

Often in Greek what you will do is use the definite article *the* and translate it as a possessive pronoun...*his, hers, ours, yours*...depending on the context and what precedes it. This is perfectly appropriate in Greek. If that's the case here, then what this means is that the prophet is not to go beyond or to fall short of what God has given to him personally: his faith, what he knows by faith. He is to deliver *that* and that *only* and *all* of that. He doesn't get to decide what to deliver. He just merely delivers it.

The second way to look at this phrase is to stay with the definite article *the*. If this is the case, "In proportion to *the* faith," then we can look at the word *proportion*, which is often translated, especially outside the Bible, as *analogy* or *ratio*. Most of the time we see this word for *proportion* it's in mathematical texts in the Greek. It's an analogy or a proportion or a ratio.

What that means is the prophet is always to speak in accordance with prior revelation, according to what we call the *analogy* of the faith. It means there is never a gift of prophecy that contradicts the Bible. Now this is an important principle for us, even though this gift has ceased. We are never to take as truthful any teaching or supposed prophecy that contradicts the Bible. The Bible is the only rule of faith and life. This fundamental error is where the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons go wrong.

They have said, "We have new revelation, new prophecy to point out where the Bible was wrong. Stop believing this in the Bible, and believe our new revelation." Whenever anyone comes to you and says they have prophecy that supersedes and replaces the Bible, never listen to them. Prophecy will never contradict the Bible. Biblical teaching will never tell you to disbelieve the Scriptures.

The second understanding gift Paul speaks about is *teaching*. This is easier to understand. Teaching differs from prophecy in that it is not revelatory. The prophet can impart truth, and that in the case would be teaching, but the teacher does not impart revelation from God. The teacher was of crucial importance in Paul's day, because most people in Paul's day could not read or write, and they did not possess a copy of the Scriptures, even the Old Testament.

So they would have relied on teachers to explain what the Bible means, what God wanted them to believe. We see this in the Gospels, when our Lord Jesus Christ unrolls the scroll of Isaiah and reads the scroll and teaches from it. They were relying on him in the synagogue to teach them biblical truth. Teaching is similarly important today.

Many people are confused about what the Bible teaches. Most people need assistance working through the material of the Bible. This is not because the Bible is some obscure, dark book that we cannot understand. This is how education works. It's not as if it's impossible to teach yourself geometry. It's not impossible to teach yourself Spanish. You could even teach yourself biology, but wouldn't we agree that it's far easier to have someone else teach us these subjects?

That's the whole principle behind education. We have a teacher who helps us to understand. So it is with the Bible. God has given the gift of teaching to some so that his church would know the truth of his Word, but we must remember the context we started with. The teacher does not teach for his own popularity or his own satisfaction. The teacher teaches for the benefit of the body.

The third understanding gift is *exhorting*. Again, we need to avoid limiting this word to our common understanding. Some translations translate this word *encouraging*. When we think of that, we think of a weak word that means something like a pat on the back or when someone comes alongside us and says, "Good job" or "Don't worry; it will get better," but this word is far more powerful than that.

It is translated in the Bible in different ways in different contexts. It could be translated to *comfort* or to *console* or to *entreat* or *beg* or to *advocate*. It is this word that is used to describe the Holy Spirit as our Comforter. It is this word that is used to describe the Lord Jesus Christ as our Advocate in the Scriptures. If teaching is addressed to the mind, then exhorting is addressed to the heart and the will.

This has great application for the church. The first place we might think of it would be those who are evangelists or those who press the gospel on others. They press the heart and the will for a decision for Christ. They remind us that it is not enough to know who Jesus is; we must trust Jesus. If we are not trusting him with our lives, if we are not trusting him as the payment for our sins, we are lost. It is not enough to rattle off facts about Jesus. Jesus must take root in our hearts and our wills.

Even beyond that, it describes those who come alongside others in the church who are in times of struggle or difficulty. We need those who have this gift to encourage us, to point us to Jesus, to give us hope. All of these gifts are important in the church. They are all also very public. If we were to say which gifts people strive after, it would be *these* gifts, but these gifts are not the only gifts. As a matter of fact, they are not the only important gifts.

Gifts for Community

Paul then begins to describe three gifts that are focused on community in the church. These gifts are used for the stability of the church. The church is more than an educational institution. We need to be taught and exhorted, but that is not *all* we need. We also need community and relationships. Now, as a brief aside, this is why we have Community Groups here at Christ Church. Worship is critically important. So is Sunday school. So are Bible studies. But we need more than that. Paul makes that clear.

He has given a whole set of gifts to build community in the church. Are you exercising these gifts? Are you letting others minister to you with these gifts? If not, you need to be challenged by Paul here. There is an immediate application before we even begin to think about specifics. If you are not in a Community Group today, I want you to pray about joining one this fall. Community is of great importance to God. It is so important he has given gifts to foster it.

The first of these community gifts is *contributing*. The English word means to give with or to give to a common fund. That translates very well the Greek word which means to share or to impart or to give with. For many of us, even those who give regularly, it may come as a surprise to talk about giving as a spiritual gift. We often think about giving as an obligation. It is something we do because God tells us to do it. We want to be obedient to God and thankful to God and show our love to God, so we do it.

What Paul is saying here is something beyond that. There is a spiritual aspect to it. When we fail to think about the spiritual aspect to giving, we miss out on the community aspect of this gift. We only think about the relationship *we* have to God when we view it only as an obligation, but of course, God needs nothing. He doesn't depend on our giving at all. His church will survive and thrive without anyone giving anything.

Why, then, are we called to give? Because God blesses us in our giving and others *through* our giving through the communal aspect of giving. We depend on each other. We see the benefits that others bring. We see the blessings others receive. That's why giving is a spiritual gift. Well, how *are* we to give? Paul tells us. He says, "In generosity." This means more, although not less, than giving freely and largely.

What this phrase can also mean is in simplicity; that is, in sincerity. It refers not just to the amount we give but to the heart of the giver. We are to give with a single-minded purpose. We are to give for the glory of God, not for other side benefits, not so others will think we are wealthy or others will think we are generous. We give with sincerity for the glory of God.

Do you have the gift of contributing? Let me put it *this* way. We often want to see men in our midst who have the gifts of teaching and exhorting, and we tell them they should go off to seminary and become pastors to exercise their gifts, that they would be in full-time Christian ministry. When they do that, we think that, somehow, they have achieved more than *we* have achieved. They are a greater person in the kingdom of God than *we* are.

But not everyone has those gifts. More importantly, those are not the only important gifts. God may have called you to be successful in business. God may have called you to be a great engineer. God may have called you to be successful so you can exercise your gift of contributing. God uses people with those gifts in the church. He uses them to fund the work of missions, to fund the work of the gospel, to fund the work of mercy. Do not shy away from that gift.

The second gift of community is *leading*. This word means more than just telling people where to go. Often in our society we think what leadership is is controlling and directing people, but the word here actually means good management or good administration. It means to be single-minded with focus for the good of the body, the church.

Someone who has this gift is not easily sidetracked. He is not distracted. He is devoted to the good of the church. For example, in Titus, chapter 3, we are told we are to be devoted to good works. The word *devoted* in Titus 3 is the same word for leading here in Romans 12. We are to be devoted to the church and its good.

This is to be done, Paul says, with zeal, with an eagerness, without reluctance or hesitation. Those with this gift have the good of the body in mind. They are not concerned with themselves but, rather, with the good of the community. They make sure the church is on mission, that the church follows the directives of her Savior.

The final community gift is *doing acts of mercy*. The Greek here is actually even simpler: to show mercy or to be merciful. Again, we have here additional words in the English...*do acts of*...supplied to help us understand the sense of what Paul is saying. There is a close relationship between *this* gift and the gift of contributing or giving. In both, the gift possessor gives of himself for the benefit of another materially.

Giving of yourself is common to all gifts, but it is significant that Paul views these very material and practical matters as being resolved by spiritual gifts. We often think of material things as being anti-spiritual, but Paul tells us just the opposite. These material things have spiritual implications. This gift is more direct than the gift of giving or contributing. In this instance, the giving is not for the general need of the body, which is also important, but to the specific needs of individuals.

So how is this gift to be exercised? This is important. Often works of mercy are done grudgingly because they are disagreeable. We realize they're something we have to do, but we don't really enjoy them. They often involve helping in situations that are unpleasant or especially helping in situations where someone has brought the problem upon themselves through foolishness. We know how to show mercy, but we're not exactly happy about doing it.

Paul says, again, just the opposite. He says works of mercy are to be done with cheerfulness, with joy, even. The word here is the word we get *hilarious* from. You may recall a form of this word in 1 Corinthians 9, where Paul tells us God loves a cheerful giver. It's the same word. The point is there is more to this gift than resolving a problem someone else has. The point is to encourage the recipient as he senses the joy and the cheer in the giver. Do you have that gift? Then exercise it in the church today. We need that gift so much.

In conclusion, our Lord has given these gifts to believers for the benefit of his church. The gift you have is not yours. It belongs to Jesus. He has given it to you so you might be a blessing to his people. Never forget that. That means you are also obligated to bless his people with your gifts. You cannot claim that you have no gifts. Paul says that statement is a lie. Every believer has a gift to share. Are you sharing *your* gift? Are you active in Christ's body? If not, why not? The Lord Jesus Christ is calling you today to use your gift for the blessing of his people.