

“Right Living”
Romans 12:3-8
October 1, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

The gospel that Paul has been so carefully explaining and proclaiming for the first 11 chapters of Romans is no mere theoretical philosophy. It is God’s appointed means for bringing about the changes so desperately needed in our broken world. These changes must start with God’s people, and the concluding chapters of Romans, beginning with chapter 12, detail the nature of the changes. The Bible is far more concerned with getting Christians to act like Christians than it is in getting non-Christians to behave in a Christ-like manner. Church people sometimes fall into the error of being overly bothered by the misbehavior of non-Christians, while at the same time giving inadequate attention to changes needed in our own lives.

The theme of these chapters could be summarized by the title of today’s sermon: “Right Living.” Paul alternates between the two arenas of right living, the church and the world. As Christians, we are citizens of two kingdoms: the kingdom of God in the church and the kingdom of this world. We have obligations to both kingdoms. The verses before us today describe the components of right living within the Church. Specifically, Paul wants us to know what gift God has given us for our life within the Church.

Before getting into the meat of this passage, I want to point out a detail that is easily missed. The verbs and pronouns are all second person plurals. One of the glories of our beautiful southern dialect is that we have a second person plural pronoun, unlike formal American English. I think the pronoun ya’ll should gain more widespread acceptance. Greek has a second person plural, and it is used throughout these verses. We often misread the first two verses of the chapter as if it was all second person singulars, describing what we as individual Christians are to do. We read it as if it is merely commanding individuals to offer their bodies as living sacrifices and to be transformed by the renewing of their minds. The New Testament scholar Richard Hays sets us straight when he writes, “The metaphor of ‘living sacrifice’ describes the vocation of the community: the addressees of the letter are called to present their bodies together as a single collective sacrifice of obedience to God.” In other words, as Frank Thielman has said, Paul “envision[s] a new society of transformed individuals that function as God’s prototype for what human society will look like when his restoration of the world is complete.” So while these verses do speak of individual transformation, there is a bigger purpose in mind. Paul is describing the church as the outpost of the coming kingdom. We are to be a new community marked by the features Paul lists in the verses of these chapters.

I. Right Thinking

A great deal of what happens in our lives is determined by what goes on in the mind. That's what Paul meant when he said in verse 2 of this chapter that we are to be transformed by the renewal of the mind. He now tells us more about this renewal of the mind. The word "think" is used four times in verse 3, though only three are translated with our English word. Proper thinking is so important that Paul introduces it with emphasis. When he says, **"by the grace given to me,"** that is a common way he spoke about his authority as an apostle. And when he says, **"I say to everyone,"** he is copying the words of Jesus who would often say, "Truly I say to you..." There is a way we are not to think and, more positively, a way we are to think.

Paul addresses first the wrong way to think. He wants each of us **"not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think."** It is our old enemy of pride that is being opposed here. It is an enemy requiring vigilance because it is always lurking. Several years ago, the College Board invited the one million high school seniors taking its college entrance test to indicate "how you feel you compare with other people your own age in certain areas of ability." 60% rated themselves as better than average in athletic ability while only 6% rated themselves as below average. In leadership ability, the results were even more extreme: 70% said above average and 2% below average. In the category "Ability to get along with others," less than 1% rated themselves as below average, while 60% rated themselves in the top 10% and 25% saw themselves as belonging in the top 1%. Perhaps this is partly due to the "every child gets a trophy" culture of modern American life.

I find a common application of this command in the tendency to substitute intention for action. Because I intend to do something, it's as good as done. Whether it's to be more faithful in Bible reading, begin exercising, eat fewer processed foods, or any number of other resolutions, we can think more highly of ourselves simply by putting it in the accomplished category merely by intending to do it. In the process, we fail to realize that the intention to do something good is like poking a bear. It awakens our sinful nature to fight this good thing.

Paul goes on to state the flip side of this coin in a more positive way. Instead of thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think, he urges us to **"think with sober judgment."** "Sober judgment" is one word in the original, consisting of a form of the same word for "mind" that has been used throughout these verses. It basically means a sound mind, straight thinking, even sanity. To say it differently, Paul wants us to deal with the reality that is rather than the reality we may want. To live in unreality is a type of insanity that is harmful to the person living in such unreality.

I knew a young lady in the first church I served out of seminary who thought of herself as being a gifted vocalist. She was a voice major in college, and she desperately wanted to sing solos in our church. This church had an excellent music program and typically hired professional vocalists as soloists. She eventually prevailed upon the music director to give her a solo, perhaps due in part to the fact that her father was an elder in the church. For those of us who knew this young lady, her solo was a painful experience. Despite all the effort she had made to be able to sing beautifully, the reality was that she had not been given the gifts to do so.

I can tell a similar story on myself. When I was younger, I desperately wanted to play football at the high school level. I went to a new high school my freshman year, and all summer I worked hard to be prepared for tryouts for the freshman football team. I lifted weights, ran, and tried to eat the foods that would help me gain weight. It just so happened that I went through something of a growth spurt that summer before my freshman year. Unfortunately for my football aspirations, the growth was only up and not out. By the time tryouts started, I was about 5' 10" tall, but weighed only 115 pounds. The reality I was soon forced to accept was that God had not given me a football body. Had I failed to accept that reality, not only would I not have been a good football player, I would probably have subjected myself to numerous orthopedic surgeries throughout my life.

There is an important parenting principle in this verse. Parents need to help their children not think of themselves more highly than they ought to think, but to think in line with reality. Don't tell your children they are gifted in an area where they are not gifted. You will bring harm to them if you do so. You want to help them be honest about both their giftedness and their un-giftedness. Our next point will help us know how to do so.

II. The Right Standard

Our right thinking is to be according to the right standard, **“according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”** What does this mean? One commentator records dozens of possible meanings of this phrase. Let me give you my conclusion. It doesn't refer to the amount of faith God has given, which would invite us to compare ourselves with others as to how much faith we have. In doing so, it would likely lead us to do the very thing Paul has just told us not to do: to think too highly of ourselves. I was helped in deciding upon the meaning of this phrase by thinking about the verb “assign.” It's a word that means literally to divide. “Assign” is a good translation, as long as we keep in mind that it has the idea of God doing different things for different people. Where Paul is going with all this is to speak of the gifts God has chosen to give to his people. God gives different gifts to different people. It's God's decision.

Recognizing this gives us the right question to start with. We don't ask first, "What do I want to do?" That question can easily be put in service to our pride by leading us to conclude that we want to do the thing that will make us look good in the eyes of others. A better question to start with is, "What has God done?" What gifts has he given?

If that's what Paul meant, why didn't he just say that? Why did he use the term "measure of faith?" I can think of two reasons. First, our gifts are to be exercised out of faith, not guilt. There is no shortage of need within any church, and there are multiple opportunities to engage in ministries that are essential and desperately needed. You may hear a call for ministry to children, ministry to youth, to foster children, to the poor, to unwed mothers, to internationals. All are essential, but none of these needs should be responded to out of guilt. Rather, the guiding principle for us should be faith. What need has God placed on your heart? Whatever answer you give comes by the faith that God has given you. If your heart goes out to children, God has given you faith to labor in this area. A good question to ask yourself is this one: "What people-need resonates deeply in my heart?" God has put that need there.

I think there's a second reason he uses this phrase "measure of faith." He's trying to remind us again of the central truth of the gospel. If pride is the main obstacle to discerning and using our gift properly in the church, then the gospel is the antivenin of the poison of human pride. Human pride is always seeking to compare ourselves with others in order to feel good about ourselves. The gospel declares that we have already been given the perfect righteousness of Jesus, been made a son or daughter of God, and have a bright future ahead of us. Steve Brown words it in a way only he could. He says that if someone calls you ugly, it hurts. But the hurt will go away if three things are true. If you really are ugly, you know you're ugly, and you don't care that you're ugly, then it won't hurt to be called ugly. The gospel works similarly, starting by giving us the honesty to admit the ugliness of indwelling sin. But then it releases us from that ugliness by helping us see that by faith we have been covered with the robe of Jesus' righteousness. This delivers us from pursuing a gift that we think will boost us in some way and instead simply recognizing what God has done and receiving that.

III. The Right Gift

It is only when we get these first two points right that we are prepared to know what gift God has given to us. Paul names seven gifts here. This is one of four different places in the New Testament where gift lists are given. No two lists are identical, which leads me to conclude that these lists are illustrative, not exhaustive. So the specific gifts that are listed here are not the main point Paul is making. He focuses instead on two other aspects of these gifts.

The first point of emphasis is the need for a diversity of gifts. **“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”** (v. 4-5). Here and elsewhere, Paul likens the church to a human body, where there is both unity and diversity. Each of us has but one body controlled by one mind, but with a diversity of parts. The church is the same, and both unity and diversity are essential for the right functioning of the church. Our unity is expressed in our allegiance to Jesus as the Head of the church. Our diversity is expressed in the necessity of the various gifts Jesus gives to his church.

Paul makes the rather simple and obvious point that we don't all have the same gifts. **“Having gifts that differ,”** he says. But is this an obvious point? During the decades I have served as a pastor, I have noticed the tendency we all have to want others in the church to value our gifts as much as we value them. Those with a gift for mercy ministry may sometimes want everyone in the church to get on board with that ministry. The same could be said for any other area of ministry. This is the error Paul is seeking to counter here. If we have a church where everyone values and seeks the same gifts, we have a weak church. It would be like every body part wanting to be the right arm. But bodies also need legs and stomachs and noses and ears.

The second point Paul makes is to make use of whatever gift God has given. He makes that point with every one of the seven gifts he lists. Whether it's prophecy, teaching, serving or leading, don't let the gift go dormant. It's not enough to know what your gift is. We must also act on that gift by using it for the benefit of the church and for God's glory. Like the muscles of the body, unused gifts atrophy in time. A healthy body and a healthy church are both marked by a diversity of gifts that are all being exercised.

CONCLUSION:

Paul begins his practical section of the letter with words about the functioning of the church. It is clear that he valued the church. Let me leave you with words from a prayer letter of one of our missionaries, Mike Sense, serving in Prague. “In the end of time, there will only be one, let me say it again...there will be just one institution left. It will not be the NFL, NASA, the US government, or the United Nations. As with the Aztecs, the Ottoman Empire, and others, they will eventually go away. In the end it will be the Church that will be left. It is for her that Christ came, for her that Christ died and for her that Christ will come again.” We have the privilege and opportunity to give ourselves to this institution that will last. May God help AVPC to be this outpost of the coming kingdom, bringing hope to a broken world!

Discussion Questions
Romans 12:3-8

1. What were some of the main factors that God used to lead you into the central calling of your life?
2. Do you know what your spiritual gift is? What would you say it is and how did you discover what it is?
3. How can we help our children think of themselves with sober judgment and not more highly than they ought to think?
4. The point was made in the sermon that the phrase “measure of faith that God has assigned” means that God has put within each of us the kind of faith that that wants to meet a particular people need. What people need does your heart resonate with? Children’s ministry? The teaching ministry of the church? Mercy Ministry? Etc?
5. It is clear from the fact that Paul begins his practical section with directions about right living in the church that Paul values the church. Yet we live in a day when church is being valued less and less all the time. According to a recent survey, 40 million Americans have stopped going to church in the last 25 years. Is there some little part you can play in reversing that trend?