

## **Romans: A Call to Humility and Service**

**Romans 12:3-8**

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

*January 30, 2002*

If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 12, as we continue to work through this great passage together. Last week we looked at Romans 12 verses 1 and 2. In this passage Paul makes a grand declaration about Christian living and we've said this whole second section of the book, from chapter 12 through 15, is about living of the Christian life, the Christian way of life Paul is now speaking about, and he's making a manifesto in these opening verses of Romans chapter 12. He says, in a very provocative way in the verse first two verses, that he wants us to live our lives for God. He wants us to give ourselves for God and he does it in a striking way. He says that he wants us to put ourselves up on the altar. All the people in his day and time would have been familiar with sacrifices and Paul is saying to them, climb up on that altar and give yourself for God. It would be like Paul starting a campaign for Christian living and inviting everyone in the city to come and the campaign banner is unfurled and the campaign theme is "Die for Jesus."

Now, that would be a fairly shocking way of putting that, but it's no less shocking than what Paul says in verse 1 of Romans chapter 12 when he says that he wants you to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice." He is talking about a whole soul, whole life commitment to live for God. In fact we put it in this way last week. It says as if Paul is saying to us, "don't give your heart to Jesus, He wants more than that." In our day and time people very often think that they can have a private and personal relationship with God which impacts no other part of their life. It doesn't impact their living with their husband or their wife, with their children, with their job, with their neighbors. It impacts nothing. They have this personal relationship with God. They feel close to God, they have nice thoughts about God, they seek for the comfort of God, but it does not impact any area of life and the Apostle Paul is saying, I don't want that kind of disembodied spirituality from you Christians. I want a Christianity that pervades every aspect of your life. In fact he is going to talk about the heart in verse 2. He wants it to emanate from the heart, from our inner man, from the inside out. He wants us to be transformed. He says, "by the renewing of our mind," but he wants that to transform the totality of ourselves. Paul is laying down a grand manifesto that

touches every area of the Christians life in Romans 12 verses 1 and 2.

Then when he gets to Romans 12 verse 3, he wants to talk with us about how we relate to others in the family of God. He wants us to think about how grace works out in the life of the family of God. That's what we're going to look at tonight as we hear God's word. So, let's turn to that word in Romans 12 beginning in verse 3.

For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy accounting 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; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. Amen.

And thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired and inerrant word, may He write His eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Lord we thank you for Your word. We ask that by Your spirit You would cause the truth of Your word to be realized in our lives. In Jesus name. Amen.

Paul, in these verses is speaking to Christians, not just those Roman Christians almost two thousand years ago, but to Christians today by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit about how we ought to relate to one another. How Christians ought to serve one another. How Christians ought to serve one another. How Christians ought to use their gifts and their abilities and resources to help one another.

In this context of the discussion, he gives us three platforms for serving one another in the church. They are humility, the communion of the saints and the purpose of spiritual gifts. I'd like to walk through those with you in this passage tonight. You'll notice in verse three he is speaking about humility. In verses 4 and 5, he's speaking about the reality of the communion of the saints. In verses 6 through 8, he's speaking about the purpose of spiritual gifts and the way he wants to see them used. Let's walk through this passage then together. Let's begin in verse 3.

### **I. Grace should lead to humility.**

Grace, Paul knows, can lead to pride if we're not careful. It ought not to, it's not designed to, but there is no blessing that God gives that we can't turn upside

down. So the apostle knows that grace on occasion led to spiritual pride and he doesn't want it to, he wants it to lead to humility. So he says, "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." Paul is speaking here not just as an apostle, but as an example. He's standing before them as a person who has been given the grace of apostleship. Now, none of us here has been given the grace of apostleship. If you think you have, don't raise your hand. None of us here have been given the gift of prophecy as Paul had the gift given to him and we could name many other gifts that Paul had that we don't have.

Paul is emphasizing here that he is speaking to us as Christians in the light of the graces that had been given to him and in light of the fact that those graces that God had given to him had not led him to spiritual pride, but had cultivated real humility in him. In fact, you can trace Paul's humility in passing comments that he makes in his letters. He can refer to himself in one place as "the least of the apostles." In another place he can refer to himself as "the chief of sinners." This apostle was confident in what the Lord had called him to do. He was secure in his relationship with the living God, but he was not puffed up and that is marvelous in light of the gifting that God had given him. So when he says in verse three that "in light of the grace given to him," he's wanting to tell you something. He's letting you know that this not a dry land sailor that is about to address to you. It's important for us not to be puffed up by the spiritual graces that God has given to us. Paul can come to us and say, look I have been given grace upon grace and by God's grace I have not cultivated a spirit of spiritual pride, but of humility therefore you to ought to cultivate humility. We are able to see then that Paul is not telling us to do something that he has done himself also had to do. The apostle is telling us here in this passage that Christians ought to serve one another. That is the theme throughout verses 3 through 8. In verse 3, he is telling us that we ought to serve one another because of humility. Grace ought to cause us to be humble.

The apostle wants us to see that that humility is necessary in order to serve one another as we ought. He says in verse 3, "I say to everyone among you." There is evidently a possibility amongst these Roman Christians that some of them are allowing spiritual pride to get the best of them. These gifts and graces that they have received had led them to be spiritually prideful and Paul wants to deal with that pride and selfishness here. He wants to deal with the problem of the over inflated ego to be sure, but it is also clear from what follows that he wants to deal with the attitude which looks out for number one first. Paul wants to cultivate another attitude amongst these Christians. He doesn't want them internal and self-centered. He wants them humbled and other serving. So Paul says, "I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think."

Now, Paul's not asking up to poor mouth ourselves. You know, Paul's not trying to start a contest amongst Christians for those who can seem most self-abasing. You know, the Christians who never looks up at you, just sort of holds the head

over thinking that this is the most spiritual posture that you can possibly be in, never to look up. Sort of hunched over and arched way down with a great burden of self-doubt. This is not what the apostle is asking for. In fact he is explicitly says that he's asking for a sober self-assessment. Be realistic about yourself he's says. That on the one hand means realize that every gift you have is just that, a gift of God. You didn't create that in you, He created that in you. On the other hand He wants us to be mindful of what our gifts are. This kind of humility is a fertile soil for Christian service to others. I'll never forget standing in the little kitchenette in the Dean Center at Reformed Theological Seminary the first time I met Dr. Yusufu . Some of you know Dr. . He's teaching at Belhaven College right now. All I knew of him at that time was that he was an international student, a tall, lean, black African, and Mr. Jinkiri was emptying the trash can and he was mopping the floor and he was scrubbing the walls. He was doing maintenance in the Dean Center and we struck up a conversation. Dr. Jinkiri never told me he was an education professor in his homeland. He never told me the important positions that he had held in his denomination and in his nation. He only told me that he had come to RTS in order to study with Will Norton. He went on and on and talked about Will Norton. Later I heard in a chapel presentation, both who Dr. Jinkiri was and why Dr. Jinkiri had come to the seminary. You see, he had read a history of missions in his native country written by Dr. Will Norton. Now, Dr. Will Norton had played a key role in the bringing of the gospel to Dr. Jinkiri people, yet in all the pages, the hundreds of pages of this history, Will Norton had never mentioned his own name. Dr. Jinkiri read that history from cover to cover and the only time he saw Will Norton's name was under the author's indication. He said, that's the man that I want to study under. A man who can have that kind of impact and never mention his own name. You see, Yusufu Jinkiri was a man just like that. He was cleaning the Dean Center and he did not introduce himself to me as some exalted minister and leader from his own land, but simply as a student seeking to learn God's word. He was an apt servant because of the humility planted in his heart and the apostle is asking for us to cultivate that same kind of humility. It's the fertile ground, it's the launching point for service. Humility, that's the first thing that Paul says in this passage. We ought to serve one another out of humility.

## **II. We should serve others.**

Then in verses 4 and 5, Paul speaks about the communion of saints. He says, because of the reality of the communion of saints, we ought to serve one another. Now, let me throw out a confusing phrase and then I'll try to explain it in just a few moments. Unity does not mean identity, but diversity is to be used for the unity. If I had to sum up everything that Paul is saying in these two verses, that would be a one sentence short hand of how to do it. Now, I just said that you wouldn't have a clue as to what I was saying, so let me try and explain it. Unity does not mean identity, but diversity is to be used for unity. Look at verse 4 closely. Paul asks you to contemplate two realities at the same time in verse 4.

First, he asks you to remember that we are part of one body. Second, he asks you to remember that we are not the same - just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function. So, stop right there, half way through the sentence see what he's pointing you to. We're part of one body, we're not the same. This is a vital truth in a day dominated by egalitarianism of various sorts, that wants to say to you, "If you tell me that people have different functions, you're robbing them of equality." For instance, if you say that a woman can't be a preacher, you're robbing her of equality with men because she can't perform the same function. The logic goes like this: sameness of function means real equality. The Apostle Paul's says, I want you to understand that we are one, but we do not share the same functions. Paul emphatically asserts both of those at the same time. Christian unity, rightly understood, does not undercut the differences that exist amongst Christians, and differences among Christians are not to undercut the reality of Christian unity. I know that they can, but Paul says they are not to do this. So, let me give you three things that Paul is saying in verse 4. First, he's saying that unity does not mean sameness. Unity does not mean identity. That's the cryptic meaning of that little phrase. Just because we are all part of the family of God doesn't mean that I am you and you are me. You're you and I'm me and I'm not you and you're not me. That's okay. Paul is not saying that Christian salvation transforms us into a bunch of interchangeable units. No, it doesn't. We continue to be distinct personalities. We continue to have distinct gifts. Those gifts are to be used in a particular way, but that does not mean that our unity is there by disrupted simply because there are differences between us. Unity does not mean sameness. Secondly, he says, unity does not mean interchangeability. One size does not fit all in the kingdom of God. There are differing gifts. Paul stresses this in verse 4. All the members do not have the same function. He'll stress it again in verse 6, "Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us." So, there are differing gifts in the body. Not everybody in the body has the same set of gifts. Finally, unity does not mean that we are unable to differentiate between members of the kingdom. I thought of using a word that I invented this afternoon, *indiscrimnitality*, but somehow I wasn't sure that that would communicate. So, unity does not mean that we can't differentiate between members of the kingdom. There are nontransferable functions that we each have in the kingdom of God. I can't have babies. That's a non-transferable function in the family of God. I can't do it, I don't have the plumbing and it's a non-transferable thing and that's okay. We have different gifts and responsibilities in the kingdom of God. Now comes the flip side. Look at verse 5. Paul wants us to know two things again in verse 5: that there is diversity in our unity and we belong to one another. There is diversity in our unity and we belong to one another. Look at the two parts of verse 5, "We who are many are one and individually members of one another." So, Paul is telling us that just because we are different doesn't mean that we lack unity. Diversity does not mean disunity. In fact, Paul says even though we are different, we are part of one in the same body of Christ. Then he goes on in the second half of verse 5 to say again that this difference in us does not mean disunity. Why? Because we each belong to the other. Each to all others, each lives for the

others. Paul is reminding us of the overarching reality of the communion of the saints. We are one, we belong to one another, we're part of one another, and we are in a shared fellowship of life because of our union with Jesus Christ. We are different. Some of us are as different as night and day, but we are for one another and we are to live to and for one another. It's almost like that motto of the Three Musketeers, "One for all and all of one." And one of the real challenges we face in living this reality in twenty-first century America is our individualism. We think first of the self and then everybody else and then if we get outside of our self box we think of our own nuclear family and then everybody else is way down on the list. The Apostle Paul is encouraging us again to remember that we are part of the body. That body is the greatest spiritual reality of fellowship that we could possibly conceive. So that we have, as Dan Doriani was reminding us, a spiritual family to care for and we ought to serve one another because of the reality of being in that body. So there is an impetus for Christians serve, because of humility in verse 4 or in verse 3, and because of the communion of saints in verses 4 and 5.

### **III. Christians serve one another because the spiritual gifts are meant for the body.**

Finally look at verses 6 through 8. Here, Paul says that Christians serve one another because the spiritual gifts given by God are meant for service in the body. The spiritual gifts are meant for the body of Christ. We serve one another because of humility. We serve one another because we are in this body, this communion of saints, and we serve one another because the spiritual gifts that God gives to us are for service to the body.

Paul has already indicated that there are real differences of functions amongst believers and he does again in verse 6 and he draws an implication from it in verse 6. He says, that since this is so, since we have differing gifts, and since we have received those gifts from a gracious God, then we ought to use them accordingly for His glory and for the edification of the saints and for the building up of the body. Paul is saying in verse 6 that the Christian church is charismatic. Now don't all raise your hands at once. You know that Paul's word for gifts here is *charisma* so he is telling us that he wants us to contemplate this fact, that our ability to edify one another in the Christian church is a singular manifestation of the work of the sovereign holy spirit in our lives. You're ability to edify one another does not derive from native powers. It derives from spiritually gifted graces. That is what it means for the church to be charismatic, not speaking in tongues or prophesizing or even raising our hands. Being charismatic means being indwelt by and gifted through the Holy Spirit for ministry to one another and the Apostle tells us that right there in verse 6. By the way, Paul's emphasis that we have gifts that differ here in verse 6, does remind us that the Pentecostal idea that all Christians ought to be able to speak in tongues is not Pauline or biblical, because Paul's whole emphasis, not just in this section, we could look at others,

is that Christians have differing gifts. Now that leaves aside the issue of "Are there some of these extraordinary gifts that continue or have they passed away?" but that's another story for another time.

Now, Paul in verses 6 through 8, begins to rattle off seven gifts. Now this is not a complete list. Paul will give another list, a larger list elsewhere, but he's giving these gifts as examples of things given to the church by the Holy Spirit and as he does so he speaks of how they ought to be used.

First he speaks of prophecy. The ability to pass along direct words of revelation from God. But notice what Paul says. He's speaking to a fellowship in which there were people who had the ability to prophecy, that is, to convey a special revelation directly from God to His people. Notice what he says, "Yet according to the proportion of his faith." The prophet must, as a person of faith, show his trust and obedience to God's word. Paul does not want to see the specter of someone claiming to be a prophet pronouncing the words of God and yet not living in accordance with those words. That can happen. Not long ago I was meeting with someone who claimed to have the gift of prophecy and yet wanted to divorce his spouse because they didn't have the gift. She was able to convey direct words of revelation from God, but couldn't obey God's written word.

If service, in his serving, Paul says in verse 7. All the various services in the Christian life are included, high and low, known and unknown. Paul is saying, "If you have the gift of serving, exercise it. Don't wait for someone to honor you. Don't think, 'Well I'd like to have a flashier gift than that. Prophecy would really get me recognized in this bottle.'" If you have the gift of service, serve. Those with the gift of serving must exercise it rather than seeking for something more exalted to do. This gift perhaps has some special application to those who were deacons of the church.

Teaching. Paul says in verse 7, "he who teaches in his teaching." The teaching which Paul is speaking is the teaching of the truth, the conveying of the life of faith and you can imagine how vital that would have been in the life of the early church. It's vital today, but think of then, there were no Bible dictionaries. Many of the members of the congregation would not have been able to read themselves, and even if they could, they would have had no Bibles. Those were very rare things. The teacher was in the position of vital importance for conveying the faith and the life of faith to the people of God and so Paul says, he who teaches in his teaching. The teacher ought to be cognizant that that teaching is a gift to him and that teaching is not for his own self satisfaction or for his self aggrandizement, but rather for the people of God.

Paul goes on to speak of exhortation in verse 8. I'm not sure if Paul is wanting to draw a complete contrast between teaching and exhortation, but a good teacher exhorts, a good exhorter teaches. They go together. But perhaps with exhortation he has in mind the encouragement, the stimulating, and the prompting of the

people of God to embrace the truth and life of faith. Not only to teach them about it, but to encourage them to actually live it.

He speaks of giving in verse 8. "He who gives with liberality." He speaks of those who contribute to the needs of others and come to the aid of the poor and he's saying, this should be done freely, generously, not grudgingly.

He speaks of the gift of leadership in verse 8. He who leads with diligence. He's saying that those that are gifted with leadership in the church must not be side tracked, but rather diligent. I heard a lecture by Ian Murray comparing and contrasting Charles Spurgeon and Martin Lloyd-Jones. Spurgeon wrote many books, Lloyd-Jones never wrote a book. The books that we have of Lloyd-Jones are transcribed sermons. They had many differences, but one thing that he did note that they had in common was that they were wholly focused on their work. The kingdom was everything to them. The kingdom of God was the focus of their lives and in that sense they were men very much alike and the apostle Paul is saying that those who are gifted with the abilities of leading the church need to be diligent and need not to be side tracked in that work. This of course has some special application to those who are elders in the church.

Finally he speaks of the gift of mercy. He who shows mercy with cheerfulness. He's speaking of those who show compassion to those who are sick or suffering, or indigent, and this has to be done, he says, cheerfully not resentfully. Paul's point is this, whatever God has given you by way of personal abilities and resources is for the edification of the body. It belongs to the body. You are not to put it under a bushel, you're not to squander it, you are to use it for the body and so in this way Paul has said, Christian humility compels us to serve one another. A realization that we're part of the communion of saints compels us to serve one another. A realization that everything that God has given us He's given to us for one another ought to compel us to serve one another. Let us pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for Your word. We ask that You would bring about this call to other service by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In Jesus name. Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

*This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.*

*Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with*

*the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the [First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement](#).*

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

**Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).