



Study of Romans

Romans 12:3-8

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.
4. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function,
5. so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.
6. And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith;
7. if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching;
8. or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

Notes

One of Paul's favorite thoughts is of the Christian Church as a body (compare 1Cor.12:12-27). The members of the body neither argue with each other nor envy each other nor dispute about their relative importance. Each part of the body carries out its own function, however prominent or however humbly unseen that function may be. It was Paul's conviction that the Christian Church should be like that. Each member has a task to do; and it is only when each contributes the help of his own task that the body of the Church functions as it ought.

Beneath this passage lie very important rules for life.

(i) First of all, it urges us to know ourselves. One of the first basic commandments of the Greek wise men was: "Man, know thyself." We do not get very far in this world until we know what we can and what we cannot do. An honest assessment of our own capabilities, without conceit and without false modesty, is one of the first essentials of a useful life. This is especially true of your level of commitment to Christ.

(ii) Second, it urges us to accept ourselves and to use the gift God has given us. We are not to envy someone else's gift and regret that some other gift has not been given to us. We are to accept ourselves as we are, and use the gift we have. The result may be that we have to accept the fact that service for us means some humble sphere and some almost unseen part.

It was one of the great basic beliefs of the Stoics that there was a spark of God in every living creature. The Skeptics laughed at this doctrine. "God in worms?" demanded the Skeptic. "God in dung beetles?" Whereat the Stoic replied: "Why not? Cannot an earthworm serve God? Do you suppose that it is only a general who is a good soldier? Cannot the lowest private or camp attendant fight his best and give his life for the cause? Happy are you if you are serving God, and carrying out the great purpose as truly as an earthworm."



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The efficiency of the life of the universe depends on the humblest creatures. Paul is here saying that a man must accept himself; and, even if he finds that the contribution he has to offer will be unseen, without praise and without prominence, he must make it, certain that it is essential and that without it the world and the Church can never be what they are meant to be.

(iii) Third, Paul is really saying that whatever gift a man has comes from God. He calls gifts charismata (GSN5486). In the New Testament a charisma (GSN5486) is something given to a man by God which the man himself could not have acquired or attained or use properly in his own strength and wisdom.

In point of fact, life is like that. A man might practice for a lifetime and yet never play the violin like Yehudi Menuhin. He has more than practice; he has the something plus, the charisma that is a gift of God. A man might toil for a lifetime and still be handless in the use of tools and wood and metals; another can fashion wood and mould metal with a special skill, and tools become part of himself; he has the something plus, the charisma (GSN5486) which is a gift of God. One man might practice speaking for ever and a day, and still never acquire that magic something which moves an audience or a congregation; another steps on to a platform or climbs into a pulpit, and the audience are in the hollow of his hand; he has that something plus, that charisma (GSN5486) which is a gift of God.

A man might toil for a lifetime and never acquire the gift of putting his thoughts on paper in a vivid and intelligible way; another without effort sees his thoughts grow on the sheet of paper in front of him; the second man has the something plus, the charisma (GSN5486), which is the gift of God.

Every man has his own charisma (GSN5486). It may be for writing sermons, building houses, sowing seeds, fashioning wood, manipulating figures, playing the piano, singing songs, teaching children, playing football or golf. It is a something plus given him by God.

(iv) Fourth, whatever gift a man has, he must use it and the motive of use must be, not his personal prestige, but the conviction that it is at one and the same time his duty and his privilege to make his own contribution to the common good.

Let us look now at the gifts Paul singles out here for special mention.

(i) There is the gift of prophecy. It is only rarely that prophecy in the New Testament has to do with foretelling the future; it usually has to do with forth telling the word of God. The prophet is the man who can announce the Christian message with the authority of one who knows. To announce Christ to others a man must first know him himself. "What this parish needs," said Carlyle's father "is a man who knows Christ other than at second-hand."

(ii) There is the gift of practical service (diakonia, GSN1248). It is surely significant that practical service came to Paul's mind so high on the list. It may be that a man will never have the privilege of standing forth in public and proclaiming Christ; but there is no man who cannot every day show the love of Christ in deeds of service to his fellow men.

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(iii) There is teaching. The message of Christ needs not only to be proclaimed; it needs also to be explained. It may well be that one of the great failures of the Church at this present time is just in this realm. Exhortation and invitation without a background of teaching are empty things.

(iv) There is exhortation. Exhortation should have one dominating note, and that should be encouragement. There is a naval regulation that says that no officer shall speak discouragingly to any other officer about any undertaking in which he may be engaged. There is a kind of exhortation, which is daunting. Real exhortation aims not so much at dangling a man over the flames of hell as spurring him on to the joy of life in Christ.

(v) There is sharing. Sharing is to be carried out with simple kindness. The word that Paul uses is haplotes (GSN0572), and it is difficult to translate, because it has in it the meaning both of simplicity and of generosity. One great commentary quotes a passage from The Testament of Issachar which perfectly illustrates its meaning. "And my father blessed me, seeing that I walked in simplicity (haplotes, GSN0572). And I was not inquisitive in my actions, nor wicked and envious towards my neighbor. I did not speak evil of anyone or attack a man's life, but I walked with a single eye (literally, with haplotes, GSN0572, of my eyes). To every poor and every afflicted man I provided the good things of earth in simplicity (haplotes, GSN0572) of heart. The simple (haplous, GSN0572) man does not desire gold, doth not ravish his neighbor, doth not care for all kinds of dainty meats, doth not wish for diversity of clothing, doth not promise himself length of days, but receives only the will of God. He walks in uprightness of life and beholds all things in simplicity (haplotes, GSN0572)." There is a giving which pries into the circumstances of another as it gives, which gives a moral lecture along with the gift, which gives not so much to relieve the need of the other as to pander to its own vanity and self-satisfaction, which gives with a grim sense of duty instead of a radiant sense of joy, which gives always with some ulterior motive and never for the sheer joy of giving. Christian sharing is with haplotes (GSN0572), the simple kindness which delights in the sheer pleasure of giving for giving's sake.

(vi) There is being called to occupy a leading place. Paul says that if we are so called we must do it with zeal. One of the most difficult problems of the Church today is the getting of leaders in all departments of its work. There are fewer and fewer people with a sense of service and of responsibility, willing to give up their leisure and their pleasure to undertake leadership. In many cases unfitness and unworthiness is pleaded when the real reason is disinclination and laziness. If such leadership is taken up, Paul says that it is to be taken up with zeal. There are two ways in which an elder may deliver a communion card--through the mail or at the altar. There are two ways in which a teacher may prepare a lesson--with heart and mind or in the most perfunctory way. A man may dully and drably go through some task in the Church, or he may do it with the joy and thrill of zeal. The Church today needs leaders with zeal in their hearts.

(vii) There is the time when mercy has to be shown. It has to be shown with gracious kindness, Paul says. It is possible to forgive in such a way that the very forgiveness is an insult. It is possible to forgive and at the same time to demonstrate an attitude of criticism and contempt. If ever we have to forgive a sinner, we must remember that we are fellow sinners. "There but for the grace of God, go I," said George Whitefield as he saw the criminal walk to the gallows. There is a way of forgiving a man that pushes him further into the gutter; and there is a way of forgiving him which lifts him out of the mire. Real forgiveness is always based on love and never on superiority. What is real and important to you right this moment is completely obvious to God. Is it that way with you, too?

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