

# Serving in Christ's Body Pt. 1: The Necessity of Humble Evaluation

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Romans 12:3

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For the last four weeks of our study, we have been parked in the first two verses of Romans 12 – for good reason! These first two verses serve as the theological pillars on which all of the practical theology of the final 5 chapters will rest. I want to take a brief moment and survey the theological ground we have covered this far:

## THE CHRISTIAN'S DEVOTION TO GOD

Verse 1 The Christian's worship: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice..."

Verse 2a The Christian's separation: "Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world..."

Verse 2b The Christian's transformation: "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind..."

Our study this morning brings us to verses 3-8, where Paul will instruct us concerning the Christian's commitment to the body of Christ. We will divide verses 3-8 into a three-part series that will look like this:

## THE CHRISTIAN'S COMMITMENT TO THE BODY OF CHRIST

Verse 3 The Necessity of Humble Evaluation

Verses 4-5 The Wisdom of Unity and Diversity

Verses 6-8 The Joy of Community Service

We've learned over the last four weeks that the chief obligation of every true Christian is to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. It is only as a living sacrifice that we can be what God desires us to be and do what He desires that we do. What Paul begins to do in verse 3 and the following is to identify the marks of a person whose life is continually on the altar - fully devoted to God. This morning we will see that person thinks about himself or herself with humility.

*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. Romans 12:3-8*

## **1. AS TRANSFORMED BELIEVERS, WE MUST REJECT THE TEMPTATION TO HAVE AN EXALTED VIEW OF OURSELVES.**

*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...*

The first question I want us to consider this morning is why Paul begins his application of Romans 12:1-2 with the theme of humility. I think there are a handful of reasons:

- A. The life we are to live as believers is in response to the mercy and grace of God (v. 1). Pride is the antithesis of the Christ-honoring spiritual worship that we are to offer God.
- B. Pride is the portrait of the old man who was conformed to this world with an unrenewed mind (v. 2). Paul exhorts us twice, once in Ephesians 4:22 and Colossians 3:5, to put off the old man. In Colossians 3:12 he include humility as a virtue that we are to put on. He says, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."
- C. We are to live a life that imitates the life of Christ who humbled Himself before God and man.
- D. The life that we are called to, and Paul writes about in the following verses of Romans 12 is an others-centered life.

The first thing I want us to notice from the text is Paul's universal call as it pertains to having a humble assessment of ourselves. He says, "I say to *everyone* among you..." It's important that we understand that Paul isn't talking to a select few here. The call for humility includes every follower of Christ. Why is this? It's because we all struggle with pride. We all struggle with having an inflated view of our own importance. It is a part of our Adamic nature to enthrone ourselves in our own minds. Mathew Henry once said, "Pride is a sin that is bred in the bone of all of us, and we have therefore each of us need to be cautioned and armed against it." We often think we are better than others or at least our way of doing things is better. We think we have nothing to learn from others. We are critical of others. Though we are willing to voice our opinions of how others are doing wrong, we ourselves resent correction. We are easily offended, we long to be noticed, and we talk about ourselves incessantly – both our accomplishments and our problems. Charles Spurgeon once said:

*There is nothing into which the heart of man so easily falls as pride, and yet there is no more vice which is more frequently, more emphatically, and more eloquently condemned in Scripture. Pride is a thing which should be unnatural to us, for we have nothing to be proud of. In almost every other sin, we gather up ashes when the fire is gone. But here, what is left? The covetous man has his shining gold, but what does the proud man have? He has less than he would have had without pride, and is no [richer whatsoever]. Pride wins no crown.*

Though we have been redeemed in Christ the residue of that old man still remain. We carry with us into the Christian life a predisposition to self-love and self-driven thinking. William Cowper, the 18<sup>th</sup> century poet and hymn writer once penned these words:

*When I would speak what thou hast done  
To save me from my sin,  
I cannot make thy mercies known,  
But self-applause creeps in.*

## WRONG KIND OF THINKING TO BE REJECTED

Paul says, “[Do not] think of [yourself] more highly than [you] ought.” We are to reject the temptation to have an exalted view of ourselves. Paul uses the Greek word (*huperphroneo*) which means to be high-minded. The prefix that Paul attaches to the word think in verse 3 is “*huper*”. It’s the same prefix that we see in Romans 5:20 where Paul says, “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” Literally the text says grace super abounded! Likewise when Paul uses this prefix “*huper*” and attaches it to the word think in verse 3, the text literally says, “Do not super-think yourselves.” Not only does Paul use emphatic language here, but he also uses a play on words. He uses the word think four times in verse 3. The text could literally be translated, “Do not super think yourself more than you ought to think, but think with sober (sensible) thinking.”

“Super thinking” or thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought can take two forms:

1. Self-deception – This is the braggart who is a legend in his own mind.
2. Self-depreciation – This is the self-conscious person who speaks disparagingly about himself in hopes of receiving a compliment.

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF THINKING TOO HIGHLY OF OURSELVES

- A. When we think too highly of ourselves we tend to underestimate our need for grace.
- B. When we think too highly of ourselves we tend to undervalue others.
- C. When we think too highly of ourselves we tend to look for ways to be served instead of ways we can serve.
- D. When we think too highly of ourselves we tend to be discontent with what God has given us.
- E. When we think too highly of ourselves we tend to take credit for what God has given.

Here is a verse that we should all commit to memory. Paul said, “For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” Galatians 6:3

## RIGHT KIND OF THINKING TO BE EMBRACED

Instead of thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought, Paul says that we are to think of ourselves with sober judgment. We are to replace “super thinking” with “sober thinking”. The word sober means sane, sensible, realistically. We are not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think, but neither does Scripture ever commend thinking more lowly of yourself that you ought. We are to think sensibly, rightly, biblically. “Have this mind among you!” Philippians 2:3-8.

## HOW ARE WE TO THINK OF OURSELVES

Paul has just spent 11 chapters positing that we are guilty sinners and deserve nothing but God’s unrestrained wrath. He explained God’s purpose of reconciliation - that in spite of our sin and rebellion God demonstrated his love for us by sending His son to the cross. He has made it clear that our salvation, our hope of eternity depends not upon ourselves, not upon our efforts or striving, not upon our deserving; but entirely upon the grace and mercy of God, the sacrifice of Christ, and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit.

We, of all people, ought not to be proud, smug, arrogant, and enamored with ourselves. To be so would be to violate every principle of the gospel of grace that Paul has labored to communicate. To think highly of ourselves would be to forget our sin and guilt, to make little of the grace of God, and to act as if we had not been in desperate need of Christ’s sacrifice. It would be to forget our election, our redemption, and our regeneration by the Spirit. It would be altogether to forget that we were deservedly rushing headlong to hell, but God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even while we were dead in our sins and trespasses, made us alive together with Christ and saved us by His grace. When we think in terms of grace we will act in terms of humility.

### **A. WE MUST REMEMBER THAT EVERYTHING WE ARE AND EVERYTHING WE HAVE IS A RESULT OF GOD’S MERCY AND GRACE.**

*Each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.*

There are a handful of ways that respected commentators have handled the last phrase of verse 3, “Each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” Some say that “measure of faith” is better translated “standard of faith”. This is possible - there are instances in the New Testament where the same Greek word (metron) translated “measure” here is translated “standard” elsewhere. The interpretation is that God has given us all a standard to compare ourselves to and that standard is Christ. We are to measure ourselves not by our own estimations of ourselves, not by the worlds standards, but by Christ. In other words, a clear focus on Christ is the key to humble thinking about ourselves. I certainly agree that when our eyes are on Christ they are not on ourselves – and that is humbling! While this certainly isn’t bad theology, I am not convinced that is what Paul is saying in Romans 12:3.

I think when Paul refers to the “measure of faith,” he’s referring to the individual and specific spiritual gift or gifts that God, by His grace gives every believer at their conversion. I think what Paul is saying here is that you are what you are and you have what you have, specifically your spiritual gifts, because of God’s grace. Counter to our prideful thinking, there is no spiritual gift or service within the body of Christ that is more exalted in the eyes of God than another. Since God is the giver of all good things, there is no room for prideful, “super thinking”. The one who washes floors is just as important as the one who handles the finances. The one who takes out the trash is just as important as the teacher. The one who keeps a watchful eye on the children is just as important as the Elder. By God’s grace, every believer receives the exact gift and resources best suited to fulfill his or her role in the body of Christ. There is no room for spiritual pride – it’s all by grace! Albert Barnes once said:

*Men commonly regard the objects on which they pride themselves as things of their own creation, or as depending on themselves. But let an object be regarded as the gift of God, and it ceases to excite pride, and the feeling is at once changed into gratitude. He therefore who regards God as the Source of all blessings, and he only, will be a humble man.<sup>1</sup>*

Look back at the beginning of verse 3. Paul says, “For by the grace given to me...” Look over at verse 6. Speaking of serving the body of Christ with the gifts that God has given us Paul says, “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us...” Paul begins his letter to the Romans back in chapter 1 verse 5 saying, “[Through Christ] we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of His name among all the nations.” Paul understood that everything he was and everything he had was a result of God’s grace. With a deep recognition of the grace that had been shown him, Paul wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:12-14 and said:

*I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service (No one is self-appointed), though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.*

Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 4:7, “ What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” We are boasters by nature. We boast about the things we love the most – oftentimes ourselves. One of the clear evidences that a person is growing spiritually is that they begin to talk less about themselves and more about God. Alexander Maclaren once said, “We are less likely to fancy that we are greater than we are when we [understand] that, whatever we are, God made us so.”

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament* (Accordance electronic ed. Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2006), n.p.

## **B. WE MUST SEE GOD'S GIFTING AS A SUMMONS TO WORK AND LOOK OUTWARD SEEKING TO PLEASE HIM AND SERVE THE NEEDS OF THE BODY.**

There are two primary ways that God has given us to keep our eyes off of ourselves. First, we remember that all we are and all we have is a result of God's mercy and grace. I don't deserve anything, nothing is owed to me, I am not what I am because of me. Remember, Paul said, "By the grace of God I am what I am" 1 Corinthians 15:10. Secondly, God has given you a gift that you are to exercise for the edification of the body of Christ. As we employ or use those gifts with a desire to please God and serve the needs of others, we find that our eyes are no longer pointed inwards but are pointed outward.

The fact that God has graciously given each of us a spiritual gift or combination of gifts implies the fact that He desires those gifts to be used. God has a role for you in serving the body of Christ. He didn't save you and adopt you into His body the church to be a bystander! Do you know what your spiritual gift is? Are you using it? We will talk more about this in the coming weeks, but the gifting that God has given you is not primarily for you. God has entrusted a specific gifting to you so that you might use that gift(s) for the greater good of the body. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12: 7, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit (spiritual gift) for the common good." What are you doing with the faith He has measured out to you?

Maybe you are uncertain of what your spiritual gift is. The best way to discern how God has gifted you is to get busy serving! As you serve, there will inevitably be ministries that you are drawn to. There will be ministries that that really excite you to be a part of. There will be ministries where you can see the fruitfulness of your labor. There will be ministries that you serve in where others in the Body of Christ affirm and encourage you. There is a good chance that this type of ministry is a ministry for which you are gifted to serve. Humbly jump in and be a good steward of your gift!

Humility of spirit is so important in the body of Christ. Peter calls us to "Clothe ourselves in humility". Let me leave you with these closing thoughts:

1. Humility pleases God (who opposes the proud).
2. Humility frees us to live others-centered lives. A self-emptied man is not a self-serving man.
3. Humility allows us to appreciate the glorious diversity of giftedness that God has blessed the church with. This will be our focus of study in two weeks when we return to Romans 12:4-5!