

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 19, 2017**

GIFTED

Romans 12:3-8

This morning we resume our “Journey on the Romans Road,” and I invite you to turn to Romans 12:3-8. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s Word.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

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THE KEY TO CHRISTIAN LIVING

Paul has told us in the first two verses of Romans 12 that the key to Christian living in response to God’s mercies and grace is to offer our bodies – the totality of our selves – as living sacrifices to God, set apart for Him and pleasing to Him. If it is our desire and aim to please God and serve His purposes, Paul says, we must no longer conform to the pattern or values of this world in the ways we think and act. We must not let the world squeeze us into its mold (JBP). We must resolutely resist the temptation to become so well-adjusted to our culture that we just go along and fit into it without even thinking (MSG). Instead, we must allow the Holy Spirit to transform us – to change us from the inside out – by the renewing of our minds, so that we may live counter-cultural, God-centered lives in a self-centered, sin-saturated, and broken world, knowing, understanding, embracing, doing, and promoting the will of God, to the glory of God.

How to flesh this out in our relationships with one another in the fellowship of Christ’s followers is the main theme of what Paul says in verses 3-8.

WARNING AGAINST AN INFLATED VIEW OF YOURSELF

He begins in verse 3 with a warning against the danger of an inflated view of yourself. “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.”

Paul understands human nature. He knows our natural inclination to have an elevated view of ourselves and our importance. He knows our natural inclination toward self-promoting pride. We *want* to think highly of ourselves. We *want* others to think highly of us. In fact, we want it so much that we are inclined to compare ourselves favorably to others in any way we can. Or, as Paul says, to think of ourselves more highly than we ought.

For this reason, it is all the more important for us to evaluate ourselves with a mind renewed and being renewed by the Holy Spirit at work in us, so that we may see and evaluate ourselves not by the standards of the world around us, not in comparison to or in competition with

others, but in accord with the way God Himself sees and evaluates us. As undeserving and unworthy sinners saved by grace.

To give you an idea of our penchant for having an inflated view of ourselves, consider the phenomenon that psychologists call “illusory superiority.” It is also known as “the Lake Wobegon Effect,” from Garrison Keillor’s fictional Minnesota town where, as you may know, “all the children are above average.” It simply means that we tend to inflate our positive qualities and abilities, especially in comparison to other people.

Here is an example: When researchers asked a million high school students (that is a pretty good sample size!) how well they get along with their peers, none of the students rated themselves below average. In fact, 60 percent of students responding believed they were in the top 10 percent, while 25 percent rated themselves in the top 1 percent.

In a study of college professors, whom you would think might have a more mature, less idealistic view of themselves, only 2 percent rated themselves below average; 10 percent viewed themselves as average; 63 percent above average; and 25 percent rated themselves as truly exceptional. Add up the numbers and you see that 88 percent judged themselves above average in their relationship skills.

One researcher summarized the results this way: “It is the great contradiction: the average person believes he (or she) is a better person than the average person.” (Adapted from Matt Woodley, “Research Shows We Inflate Our Good Qualities,” <http://preachingtoday.com/illustrations>)

New York Times columnist David Brooks cites a poll showing that 19 percent of Americans believe themselves to be in the top 1 percent of wage earners. In addition, he writes, while Americans score 25th in the world in math proficiency, we are number one in the world at thinking we are really good at math! (David Brooks, Transcript of David Brooks – The Gathering 2014)

Here is one more stat to add fuel to the fire: To evaluate the compatibility of potential matches on its dating web site, www.okcupid.com asked this question (among many others): “Are you a genius?” Would you believe that 40 percent of all respondents, and nearly half of all men, answered “yes”? As far as I know, there is no single scientific definition of “genius.” But to qualify for most high IQ societies – “genius clubs” like Mensa – you usually need to have an IQ in the 98th or 99th percentile. So we’re talking about the top one (or maybe two) percent. Which means that two out of every five respondents on okcupid.com think they are in that one or two percent. (Adapted from Rosie Cima, “The Psychology of Self-Appointed Genius,” *Priceconomics* blog, 5-11-15)

Add to this the fact that we live in “the age of the selfie.” For better or worse, we live in a culture dominated by social media, which is another indication of how prevalent and how intoxicating it is to constantly want to draw attention to ourselves and, in doing so, to make the case for our importance. This is not to say it is necessarily wrong to take a selfie and post it on social media. It depends, among other things, on your motives for doing it.

What does Paul say? “Be careful that you do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment” (12:3). “Sober judgment” means a humble, realistic view of yourself, seeing yourself as God sees you, which, of course, is to see yourself as you really are.

What Paul is warning against here is the danger of pride with all its pitfalls. J. C. Ryle, a 19th-century English pastor and theologian, wrote of the incongruence of pride in the life of a Christian: “Forgiven souls are humble. They cannot forget that they owe all they have and hope for to free grace, and this keeps them lowly. They are brands plucked from the fire; debtors who could not pay for themselves; captives who must have remained in prison forever, but for undeserved mercy; wandering sheep who were ready to perish when the Shepherd found them. And what right then have they to be proud? I do not deny that there are proud saints. But this I do say: They are of all God’s creatures most inconsistent, and of all God’s children the most likely to stumble and pierce themselves with many sorrows” (J. C. Ryle, *Foundations of Faith*).

What right have we to be proud? No right at all, if we see ourselves as God sees us, and know that we are and will always be unworthy objects of His abounding grace.

Paul goes on in the next verses to talk about gifts. Grace gifts. Spiritual gifts. Ministry gifts given by God to every one of His followers, as He freely and sovereignly chooses. That God has chosen to give you some particular spiritual gift(s) is not justification for spiritual pride in your life. And never will be. So do not let any gift(s) or opportunities or honors or spiritual fruit that comes from your labors become an occasion for “thinking of yourself more highly than you ought.”

There is another danger that Paul does not mention here, but which I am sure he would affirm. It is the opposite error of thinking less of yourself than you ought to think. Having an “inferiority complex” is not the same as exhibiting the grace of humility. Comparing yourself to others and always coming up short, or feeling yourself to be inadequate in every way and completely incapable of being used by God, is to denigrate or deny the sufficiency of God’s grace and the absolute adequacy of His power and love in your life.

God does not want you to compare yourself with other people and the gifts or skills or opportunities they have. He simply wants you to use what He has given *you* in the place where He has put you to serve him. *Whatever* your gift(s) may be. The Bible says that every believer has received some spiritual gift(s) from God (1 Corinthians 12:7). And *wherever*, in *whatever* ministry (or ministries), your service to the Lord may be.

Do not de-value or underestimate yourself or your importance in the body of believers. Do not think that you don’t matter. Because you do matter. Your contribution to the ministry of the church and its witness in the world matters.

There is an African proverb that says: If you think you are too small or too insignificant to make a difference, try spending a night in a closed room with a mosquito. See how that changes your perspective. The point of this proverb is true. It is true in the church. It is true

in the world. It is true whenever, wherever, and however God wants to use you. So, let Him. And do not ever think you are too small or weak or old or young or insignificant to make a difference.

THE ANALOGY OF THE BODY

Paul's second major point in this passage is expressed in his analogy of the human body to illustrate the nature and unity of the church as the body of Christ. It is an analogy he uses elsewhere, most notably in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. Notice what he says here in verses 4 and 5: "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."

In these verses Paul declares the *unity* of the body ("in Christ we who are many form one body"); the *diversity* of the parts or members of the body, with corresponding diversity in their roles or functions; and the *mutuality* of the different parts of the body, meaning that each part belongs to all the others and each part needs the others in order to function properly as a whole. *Unity. Diversity. Mutuality.* It is almost like the EPC's motto of unity, liberty, and charity.

Paul's point in all of this is not to give an anatomy lesson. No, the point is that the church is like the human body in these respects. In fact, writing to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 12:27, he says: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is part of it." The body of Christ around the world is made up of millions and millions of individual members who have a particular part to play in the church's mission in the world. The body of Christ in the local church – in churches like Faith and other congregations of Christian believers both large and small across the U.S. and around the world – is made up of men and women and boys and girls in that local fellowship of Christ's followers, all of whom have a place, a purpose, and a role to fulfill in the life and mission of the church. Which includes every one of us. Period.

In the church, we all belong to each other. We all depend on each other. We all need one another. And, in accordance with the spiritual gift(s) God has given us, we are placed in the body to minister to one another.

The body of Christ here at Faith needs you. Every one of you. I hope you know that. I hope you know that in order to be the church God wants us to be, in order to carry out the Great Commission God has given us, we need the engagement of every member of our church family. We need the faithful participation of every member in ministries that serve God's purposes, that glorify God, that build up the body of believers, that proclaim the gospel to spiritually lost people, and that incarnate God's love in practical and meaningful ways. We need to be a church where every member is a minister. Which is the way God designed the church. We need to be a church where every member has a place to serve. Where no one is just a spectator or a consumer of spiritual "goods," but everyone is a participant. Even if the only way you can participate is to pray. Which is way more important and powerful than most of us think.

I like to say that Faith Church is a place of grace where Jesus is Lord and everybody counts. Every person counts because every person matters to God. No exceptions. I know this is true because Jesus showed us how much we matter when He came and lived among us, and died on the cross for us. I know that every person counts, as well, because God, who loved us so much that He gave His only Son for us (John 3:16), has welcomed us into His family, the church. He has given each of us some spiritual gift(s) for ministry in the church. And He calls each of us to serve Him with our gifts and abilities in the places where His church needs us.

As Paul says in verse 6, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.” We do not all have the same gift(s). But we all do have some gift. Every spiritual gift (Paul names some but not all of them in verses 6-8) is important. And each one is needed if the church is to be healthy. Each one is needed if we’re going to fulfill our God-given mission to share the message of Jesus’ saving love with our neighbors who don’t yet know or follow Him. Each one is needed if we’re going to make disciples who are equipped to serve the Lord Jesus faithfully in the church and the world.

Like the human body that needs every part in order to function as it was created to function; like a baseball team that needs players to play every position and fill every role on the team; like a band or orchestra that needs the variety of instruments in order to give its music a rich, full, harmonious sound; so the church – *this* church, *God’s* church in the world – needs you. It needs every one of you. It needs every one of us. It needs your gifts. It needs your prayers. It needs your love. It needs your service. It needs your creativity. It needs your passion. It needs your faith and your faithfulness. It needs you to do what God has uniquely equipped and prepared you to do.

Do you know what that looks like in your life? If yes, praise the Lord and keep on serving Him with energy, intelligence, passion, and love. If not, let me suggest that you take time to read and meditate on the spiritual gifts and the proper exercise of them as you find them here in Romans 12, in 1 Corinthians 12, in Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4:10-11, where Peter says there are basically two kinds of spiritual gifts: *speaking gifts* and *serving gifts*. As you meditate on these lists of spiritual gifts, ask the Lord to show you what gift(s) He has given you and how you can use that gift to glorify Him, to bless the church, and to minister in His name to someone in need.

We’re not done with this yet, so we’ll come back to it in coming weeks and talk about specific spiritual gifts and how to exercise them.

I happen to think that good things are happening here in the life of our church. I think God is at work in our midst. I hope you want to be part of what God is doing and what He wants to do in us and through us. Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.