

Exercise the gifts that you have

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We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully (Romans 12.6 – 8).

Introduction

Last week we started to look verses 4 to 8 in Romans 12, where the apostle Paul speaks about the church of Jesus Christ, and the exercise of spiritual gifts within the church. We saw how, in verses 4 and 5, the apostle Paul gives teaching about how as believers we are all part of one body, the church of Jesus Christ, and each one has a role to play. Just as a human body has many different organs, and each one performs a vital function, and each one needs all the others, so as believers, we are all part of the body of Christ. We have different gifts, but each one has a vital role.

This leads naturally to the verses we are going to consider today, verses 6 to 8, where the apostle speaks about spiritual gifts, and how we are to exercise them.

We see a number of things from these verses:

1. Every believer is gifted

The first thing to see is that every believer is gifted. The apostle says in verse 6, "We have different gifts according to the grace given us." He does not say "Some of us have gifts", but rather "We have...gifts". The clear implication of this is that

every true believer is gifted in one way or another.

This is in line with what the apostle says in other letters where he speaks of spiritual gifts. In Ephesians 4 verse 7 he says, "But to *each one* of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." ". To each member of the body of Christ grace has been given, and in the context it is clear that by "grace" the apostle here means grace to exercise spiritual gifts.

The apostle says something very similar in 1 Corinthians 12, a chapter in which he speaks in length about spiritual gifts. He says in verse 7 of that chapter: "Now *to each one* the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good."

The Holy Spirit gives gifts to "each one" of God's people, not just to a select few.

2. Our gifting is according to the gracious decision of God

Secondly, our the gifts we have received have been given to us according to the gracious decision of the Sovereign God. Hear again what the apostle says in verse 6, "We have different gifts, *according to the grace given us.*"

What is grace? It is God's undeserved love. The reason true believers have spiritual gifts is not because they are good, but because God has decided to show his undeserved love to them. And he shows that love in varying ways to different ones of his people.

Again the same thing is said in the other letters which speak of spiritual gifts. "But to each one of us *grace* has been given *as Christ apportioned it*" (Ephesians 4.7). "All these are the work of the one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, *just as he determines*" (1 Corinthians 12.11). It is God who decides what gifts he gives to his people. And he decides not on the basis of merit or worth, but on the basis of his grace, his undeserved love.

This truth has a number of implications for us. It means, first of all that we should not be proud on the basis of the gifts we have, or view them as "status symbols". We know that this was the problem at Corinth, and it seems it may well have been a problem in Rome. It is a problem which recurs again and again in the church. Some believers feel smug because of gifts they believe they have, and they look down on others who they think do not have these gifts. But if the

gift you have received has been given to you, not because of any merit of your own, but only because of the grace of God, how can you feel proud and how can you boast about it? I mentioned a couple of weeks ago the verse from 1 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 7, and it would be worth repeating it here: “For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?”

Another implication of the truth that gifts of the Holy Spirit are given according to God’s gracious determination is that we should not envy someone else’s gifts or situation. You might look at another believer and say, “I wish I had his gift of being able to serve in that way.” It may be that you are constrained by financial limitations, or by health considerations and you are not able to serve as fully as you would like, and then you look at another believer who seems to have hardly a care in the world, with plenty of money and plenty of strength. Do not envy your fellow believer. The situation that he has been given has been determined by God, according to grace, and your own situation has equally been determined by God, according to grace. Never say, “If only my situation were different....” Be content in your situation.

3. We have different gifts

The third thing we see from this passage is that believers have different gifts. Hear again what the apostle says, “We have *different* gifts according to the grace given us.” We are not all the same. We are not all gifted in the same way.

The apostle then goes on to speak about different gifts that different believers were gifted with in his day. Some were gifted with the gift of prophesying, the ability to hear directly from God what is Word is for the church. I believe that this gift has ceased with the completion of Scripture. But other gifts mentioned continue today. There is the gift of serving. The word used here is the word for one who was a waiter at tables, serving food and wine to people as they ate. It is the word from which our word “deacon” is derived. A deacon is one who serves in the church. The apostle says that some have a special gift of being able to serve.

Then he speaks of the gift of teaching. Some are particularly gifted as teachers. This means being able to correctly understand the Word of God, and then being able to explain it to others so that they can correctly understand the meaning and apply it to their lives.

Then the apostle mentions the gift of encouragement, or exhortation. The word that the apostle uses here means literally the “call alongside”. It is used in secular Greek of an advocate, who helps his client and pleads his case in law. It is the same word that Jesus used to speak of the Holy Spirit and his ministry as a “comforter”. Some believers are particularly gifted in being able to get alongside others, and being able to listen to their problems and encourage them to make the right steps forward in their lives. You may not be someone who can teach publicly, but you may be someone who can be a great encourager. Thank God for those with this gift.

Next Paul speaks of the gift of “contributing to the needs of others.” All believers should give according to their means for the work of the Gospel and to help to provide for the needs of others. But some are especially gifted with the gift of giving. Thank God for these people. They are able to provide the necessary finance for the church to go forward in its ministry and to provide for the poor.

Then the gift of “leadership” is mentioned. Some are particularly gifted in being able to discern the best way forward, and being able to galvanise God’s people into action.

Finally, the apostle speaks of the gift of “showing mercy”. Some are particularly gifted at spotting a need and doing something to help alleviate the need. The person in need may not be particularly deserving, but this does not deter the person who has a gift for showing mercy.

Now, this clearly is not an exhaustive list of all the possible gifts of the Holy Spirit. For example, there are other gifts mentioned in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians that are not mentioned here. The thing to see from this list is the great variety of different gifts. Some are word gifts, some practical gifts. Some are the sort of gifts that would be exercised in meetings of the church, some are ones which would be exercised in outside the church. Some mainly help believers, others mainly help unbelievers.

This is an important point to make, because some will tell you that all true believers who are filled with the Holy Spirit will have a certain gift. For example, some will say that the sign of having been filled with the Holy Spirit is that you will “speak in tongues” and they will say that if you do not “speak in tongues” you are not filled with the Holy Spirit. Now I personally doubt very much that the phenomenon that people today call “speaking in tongues” is the same as what

was experienced by New Testament believers. But even if we grant that it is the same, the apostle clearly says that we should *not* expect all to speak in tongues, or languages. He says in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 29 and 30, "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?" Clearly the answer he expects from these questions is "no".

4. Gifts are to be exercised

The fourth thing to see from this passage is that gifts of the Spirit are meant to be exercised. "If a man's gift is prophesying, *let him use it* in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, *let him serve*; if it is teaching, *let him teach*; if it is encouraging, *let him encourage*; if it is contributing to the needs of others, *let him give generously*; if it is leadership, *let him govern diligently*; if it is showing mercy, *let him do it cheerfully*".

The emphasis is very much on getting on with the work. We should not be like the "wicked, lazy servant" who buried his talent in the ground. We should use the gifts that God has given to us to do good to others and extend the Kingdom of God.

Application

We have seen, then, what these verses teach us about gifts of the Holy Spirit. How can we apply what we have seen to our lives?

1) We need to meet with each other

The first thing by way of application is that we meet together. We saw this last week, but this passage further reinforces the point. Many of the gifts of the Spirit are clearly intended to be exercised when the church gathers together. If the church does not gather, how are the gifts of the Spirit to be properly exercised in a way that benefits the church?

For example, someone might have the gift of teaching. He may be able to teach the Bible in a way which is accurate, clear, and full of helpful application. But if no-one comes to hear the preaching, what good is done? Others might be gifted in being able to share a testimony, or bring a prayer or a hymn. But if the church does not gather, what good is done?

2) We need to be ready to contribute to meetings

The second thing to see by way of application is that we need to be ready to contribute to meetings when we come together. We have already seen that some have the gift of teaching, and teaching must have the pre-eminent position in meetings of the church. But this is not the only thing that should happen when the church gathers. In 1 Corinthians chapter 14 verse 26 the apostle describes the meetings of the early church in the following way: "When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church." It may be that some of the gifts that the apostle mentions here have ceased, but the principle of many different members of the church contributing to meetings is surely an enduring principle.

To be sure "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Corinthians 14.40). This means that it is good that an elder, or one appointed by an elder, presides over the meeting and makes sure it is properly conducted. But this does not mean that the elder has to choose every hymn, pray every prayer, read every reading, as well as giving the teaching. There should be room for others to contribute.

And the members of the church need to be ready to contribute. It would be not bad thing to come to meetings of the church with a hymn already chosen, with a prayer already in our mind, or a testimony ready to share, so that when there is an open time there are not long awkward periods as we wonder who is going to say something next. You never know, the testimony you share, or the hymn that you ask for, or the verse that you read out, may speak directly to the need of someone in the congregation.

3) We need to fellowship with each other outside of the formal meetings

The third thing to see by way of application is that we need to fellowship with each other outside of the formal meetings. Many of the gifts of the Holy Spirit operate in an informal setting as we share fellowship with each other.

We saw last week and this week that each local church is a miniature expression of the body of Christ. Each of us has a role to play within the body. For any body to work properly there needs to be a proper communication between the different members of the body. God has provided our natural bodies with a

nervous system, which provides a way for the different organs of our body to work together and co-ordinate with each other.

Just as there needs to be communication within the human body, there needs also to be communication with one another within the church. In his letter to the Ephesians, chapter 4, verses 13 and 14, Paul tells us that as we “speak the truth in love” we will “in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” He says later on “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully with his neighbour, for we are all members of one body” (Ephesians 4.25). There needs to be honest communication with each other if we are to function properly as a body, and if we are to grow up to maturity.

How can this exhortation for us to fellowship with each other be fulfilled if we have hardly any real contact with each other? If you come into the meeting room, and then file out again afterwards without hardly saying more than “hello” to a couple of people, and if you do not share fellowship with anyone during the week, how have you fulfilled this exhortation to “speak the truth in love” to your fellow believers?

We need to not rush off afterwards but stay behind and talk informally with each other. Find out what is going on in the lives of others, so that you can pray, and if necessary take practical action to help. Share with others what is happening in your own life. Find out about each other’s concerns and joys, temptations and victories.

This is where it is so helpful to be present at the midweek meeting, and at home groups, because these give opportunities for more sharing than is usually possible at main Sunday services.

This is where also it is helpful to get together with Christian friends during the week. I would encourage each of us to meet up at least once a week if at all possible with a Christian friend, not to go to the cinema or to play cards, but to share and pray together.

4) We need to be workers

The fourth and final application is this: we need to be workers, exercising the

gifts that we have. What is the point of the different members of the human body? Are they just to look pretty? Some parts of our bodies, it is true, are nicer to look at than others. But they all perform a function. They all work.

Have you come to the point where you are not just coming to meetings of the church, but involved in the work of the church? Some of you are keen on football. I have observed that there are two types of people who are keen on football. There are those who are keen on watching football, and there are those who are keen on playing it. It is a remarkable thing that those who are keen on watching it vastly outnumber those who are keen on playing it. So it is, I fear, amongst believers. There are many more who are keen on “watching” church life than there are those who are keen on “playing” church life. But this should not be. Every true believer should be fully involved in the life of a local church, and actively serving.

Some have sometimes spoken in a disparaging way of the “one man ministry”, where you have one man, the pastor, who does everything. The call is made for “every member ministry”. While this can be pressed too far if it is expected that every member will teach, the call has some validity. Every member of the church should be involved in the ministry of the church in one form or another.

Let me ask you some questions as we finish. First of all, are you a Christian? Have you come to see yourself as a sinner? Have you asked Christ to save you? If not, then this is what you must do before you ever try to serve Christ in the church.

But if you are a Christian, let me ask you another question. What is your attitude to the church? Do you see yourself as a member or as visitor? When you speak of what the church is doing do you speak of what “they” are doing, or of what “we” are doing? Are you coming to meetings to get, or to give? Are you involved in some aspect of the work of the church beyond simply coming to meetings? Pray God that we might all catch the vision of being members of the church of Christ, with gifts to exercise and ministries to share.

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