

Sermon for Sunday, October 21, 2010
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How Are We Designed? (How Faith Shows in the World)
Romans 12:3-8

One summer, my family attended a camp in Pennsylvania's Nittany Mountains. One child was eight and had the run of the camp. In the woods by the camp, she explored fallen logs and mountain streams and captured red-spotted newts and salamanders. One day, she burst into our room with a box of plants, bugs and newts and declared, "I was made for this."

The sense "I was made for this" is essential to topic of gifts. God created mankind for diversity within unity. Aristotle said a city finds life in its diversity (Politics 2.2). Paul says the church, like the human body, is a unity of diverse members (1 Cor 12.12-30). We are made for harmony, not singing one note in unison.¹ God hurled a variety of creative powers over humanity and he expects it to return to him (Ecc. 11:1). Each person contributes to God's plan in his own way. There is something common and something distinct in each person's life and service. Each especially grasps some elements of Jesus' goodness and grace.

Each of us has tastes in music, food, art, recreation. Each sees the world differently. To one a desert landscape brings dread, another loves its austere beauty. Some love unbroken successions of sunny days, others long for mist in the valley. God gives each person insights, abilities that fuel their distinct contribution to God's world. That's the starting point for biblical teaching regarding gifts.

God grants each of us a way to manifest our faith in this world

God bestows gifts and graces to every believer, to announce and advance his kingdom. There are four lists of gifts in the New Testament (Rom 12:3-8, 1 Cor. 12-14, Eph. 4:11-16, 1 Pet. 4:10-110). One names two gifts, one lists fifteen. No two lists are identical; none is exhaustive. The lists are illustrative, not precisely defined or encyclopedic. The main point is simple: God grants each of us certain gifts or abilities and we should find them and use them. We don't find our gifts by pouring over the lists. Rather, we look at the lists, ask "where do I seem to fit?" and then start to do things. Our gifts become clearer by more practice, not by more study.

Peter divides gifts into two categories, speaking and serving. "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words [or oracles] of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides" (1 Pet. 4:10-11). We should ask, "Do I essentially serve God and this world through words or deeds? Am I more a speaker of words or a doer of deeds? We all speak and act, but most of us are more one than the other.

¹ Lewis, Pain. Pg 155-156

Second, we can see that some gifts are more public and others more private. So, where do we tend to serve – up front or in private? Romans 12:6-8 lists seven gifts. Three are public: prophecy, teaching and leadership. Four are private: exhortation, mercy and generosity; service is generally private, too.

Every gift is from God, so each one is supernatural, but prophecy and healing are more obviously supernatural. Prophets don't "plan talks," they "receive a message." James 5:14 says "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord." The Lord can heal because of prayers. We call on doctors, who train to restore people, but God can also heal directly, because of prayer.

Gifts ultimately belong to God, not to us. We are stewards of God's grace (1 Pet 4:10). Our gifts aren't our possession or trophy. We should use them God and for others, not for selfish advantage.

Paul calls spiritual abilities "gifts" (Eph. 4:7-8), "ministries," (1 Cor 12:5-6) "manifestations of the Spirit," (12:7) but Paul's favorite term is *charismata*, "gracious gifts" or "graces" (Rom 12:6, 1 Cor 12:9, 29-31). They are "graces" because they're more than abilities. They are means of God's grace for the people around us. They empower each of us to work for the Lord and his people (1 Cor 12:7-11, 14:12).

In Romans 12, Paul reviewed God's mercies and asked every believer to respond in faith: "In view of God's mercy... offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God." We do that by offering our gifts to the Lord. But how does it work? Romans 12:3-5 explains.

Paul begins, "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you" (12:3). Paul is laying down a pattern for the church in 1 Cor. 14:37. He knows he is right to do so, because he's an apostle speaking God's very words, as no one else can (Rom 1:5, 15:15-20).

His message: "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought [to think], but rather think of yourself with sober judgment [wise thought]" (12:3). This translation reflects the Greek, where "think" appears four times in a span of eleven words. Therefore, as we consider God's graces or gifts, let's not have too high or too low an opinion of ourselves. Our self-opinion is not too high, because all that we have is a gift.

The Reformation proved this. We stand before God through Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone. We contribute nothing to our redemption. So don't think highly of self, we think highly of God. Yet we must not have too low a self-opinion. God made us in His image, He called and filled us by His Spirit. He has given us a place in His plan – our gifts matter to Him.

Paul says we think according to "the measure of faith God has given" (12:3). That doesn't mean each person should ask "What measure or quantity of faith do I have, compared to others?" That question will hardly instill the humility that Paul commands. Comparisons lead to high or low self-opinion, not sober thought.

Rather the Christian faith is the measure, the standard by which we measure ourselves.² When we measure ourselves by the faith we sober up. The faith says that every one of us is sinful. The faith says that the extent of our sin is best known through the cross of Christ. For the cross says that no teacher, no model, no motivational plan, no self-improvement program can rescue us. No, our situation is so dire that the Son of God had to enter our world, die the death we earned, and rise in life to give us life. Nothing else would suffice.

That thought, my friends, first brings amazed joy at the love of the Lord Jesus. And then it brings humility and sobriety as nothing else can. We don't get the best estimate of ourselves when we compare ourselves to others: I'm third in sales at my office and placed eleventh at the club's golf tournament. We get the best self-appraisal when we let the gospel measure us. Let the gospel measure you.

The gospel is the first measure for self-evaluation. Second, Paul says no believer is self-sufficient: "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" (12:4-5).

Just as the human body needs every part, so the body of Christ needs every member and every gift. Each one is important. We pay more attention to the head than the lungs, but we need both. We pay more attention to hands than feet, but we need both. We belong to each other. We depend on each other and enhance each other. The church is one and it is many. We are unified and varied. There is one gospel, one grace, expressed in many gifts.

How we serve in this world

"We have different gifts, according to the grace given us" (12:6). Hear the principles. First, God bestowed some gift or ability, on every believer. Everyone has at least one, even if many have several. Second, it is a gift, granted by God's sovereign and free will, for his praise, not ours. Third, while Paul does say some gifts are higher, he means they are more strategic, not that the person is better (1 Cor 12:31, 14:1-5). No one should regard himself or be judged superior or inferior on the basis of gifts. What counts to God is character and love. If it's a gift, there is no place for pride. And if God is giving the gifts, we should banish envy.

Paul lists seven gifts; only prophecy really needs explanation. In the New Testament, the supreme office and authority is an apostle. Prophets still proclaim God's truth, Paul says their statements must be "weighed" and "tested" (1 Cor 14:29-32). People sometimes say, "The Lord told me" when it's just their idea. ("The inspiration of the apostles was abiding" but "the inspiration of the prophets was occasional and transitory.")³

If a prophet says something contrary to Scripture, we must disregard what he says. Prophets should declare all that the Lord gives them to say yet no more than what the Lord gives them to

² Cranfield, 2:613-615.

³ Hodge, p. 389

say.^{4,5} The prophet must not say anything that contradicts the faith or Scripture. Indeed, no one should rest on their judgment alone as they speak or act in the church. We test ourselves against Scripture as best we grasp it, in Christian community.

Our duty: Use and hone our abilities, whatever the circumstances

Consider the next gifts: "If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage" (12:7-8). The point: If you have a gift, use that gift. Do your duty. If you're a servant, serve. If a teacher, teach. Don't let people lure you into something that looks better, pays better, sounds easier, has more prestige. Resist all that. If God made you to do something, do it! Period.

If you're over age 34 and reasonably alert, you probably have a good idea about your gifts. If you're over age 20, you should work on it. Most of you know exactly what God made you to do. And you should do it. John Lennon wrote hundreds of songs from 1960-1975. From 1975-1980, he simply stopped. We owe it to God and to the world to do what we're made to do. Each of us should use our gifts to strengthen and unify the family of God.

You can still wish you were better at some things. I wish I were better at encouraging people, making people feel loved, remembering names. We can work on our weaknesses. But we must remember, accept, and use our gifts.

We are allowed to feel some angst about our abilities. I wish I had either more leadership ability or less. Many of you feel the way about generosity, evangelism, hospitality, or service. We wonder, "Lord, why did you give me *this* much, so people expect me to give what I can almost, but not quite, give?"

We're free to take any serious thought to the Lord. One Psalm says "I was envious of the arrogant" (Psa. 73:3). We might feel strange singing that in public worship, but it does belong in private worship, prayer. Jeremiah 12:1 asks, "Why does the way of the wicked prosper?" In Job 21:7, "Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power?" Clearly, we're allowed to say, "Lord, why did you make me this way, with these gifts, not others." Say it, but know you may hear a divine rebuke, "Enough existential angst. Get back to work."

Point: If you have a gift, use it. You may not be as talented as you would like, but serve God and humanity with what you have. Someone will say this call to duty is legalism. No, that is a false definition of legalism, which has three forms:

First, the most deadly, believes that we can *do* something to obtain salvation or earn God's favor. Think of the man who came to Jesus and asked, "What good thing must I do to have eternal life?" (Matt.19:16). But we receive God's favor by faith, not works.

⁴ Moo, p. 765

⁵ Fee. Presence, pp. 608-609

Number two presents *man-made* commandments, as if the law of God. Think Pharisees. We all agree it is wrong to subtract God's law. Adding our ideas is sinful, too.

Obedience does not save, nor is it the essence of Christian life. The core is having a relationship with God, not doing deeds for God. Relationship, not deeds. That said, acts of obedience count for the Lord. So we should use our gifts, whether we're in the mood or not.

Yet our motives or moods do count. We see that in the next three gifts in Romans 12:8, "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." This is the right spirit: Give generously, lead diligently, show mercy cheerfully.

Let's explore that; the giver is generous. The term here is *haplos* which essentially means *simple* (2 Cor 8:2, 9:13). *Haplotēs* means generosity or liberality. In Jas 1:5 *haplos*, means generously. The term *simple* comes to mean *generous* this way. If someone gives *simply* it means there is no complexity, specifically, no expectation that the recipient now owes a favor in return. The generous giver loves to give.

The motivated leader is diligent or [possible trans.] eager.⁶ The leader (lit.) presides over a realm: the family, the church, the city. The head is eager to lead well. He (or she) doesn't get weary of leadership, even though it can be draining, exhausting, to have final authority. The leader doesn't do it for recognition, trophies or power, but for the people.

Mercy is cheerful. Everyone knows the person who shows mercy miserably or offers help grumpily. They tell you what a burden it is. They offer help and castigate you for needing help. They say, "Yes, I will help you pack for your trip, but why didn't you start earlier?" But the woman with the gift of mercy is like God. They give "without finding fault" (cf. Jas 1:5 NIV), "without reproach" (ESV). But God delights to give and we should too.

So then, we should serve, teach, contribute, lead, and show mercy two ways. We should do our duty, exercise our gift even if we don't feel like it, to honor the Lord, who gave the gift, and our neighbor, who needs the gift. We should ordinarily be generous, enthusiastic, and joyful when we exercise our gifts.

I think my gift is teaching. My first big speech was at high school graduation. I had a serious problem. My nihilistic friends told me "Don't tell us to study hard and do our best. We know you too well to listen." A group of girls petitioned me "We don't care what you say, as long as you make us cry." I had nothing to say and genuinely wanted to say nothing. So I talked nonsense for 5 minutes then tacked on a sappy poem. I kept people's attention, I didn't stumble,

⁶ Since "leadership" stands between "contributing" and "showing mercy" Paul may mean that those who are leaders of mercy should be diligent. Moo 768-9. It can mean support, protect in sense of serving as patron. Thus, use a high social position to defend the fledgling church, Cranfield.

and I made the girls cry. I could speak, but it wasn't a gift in the full sense, because I didn't bring truth to anyone.

My second talk came three years later. I'd given up my nihilism and converted to Christianity. Someone asked me to give a talk to the fifty students in our college fellowship. I jotted notes on a piece of paper, stuck them in my Bible, stood by a lake at dusk and started to speak. I spoke for 20 minutes; something came over me. Afterward, a friend gave me a hug and a look of puzzled pride. She hesitated, "I didn't know... you could do that." I stared back, "I didn't either."

These are the essentials of gifting: We must have a sense "I can do this thing." Outsiders must agree "You can do that! Please do it again!" If God is in it, there is more than success, it blesses people. The man or woman with the gift also wants to hone it, drill deep, get better. It's work, but we love it.

A danger

Imagine that you are at a ministry planning meeting. Everyone is pitching in, everyone cares. A generous man declares, "I'll serve any way you ask, just don't ask me to speak." We understand the fear of public speaking, so it sounds OK. But what if someone said, "I'll talk about anything, just don't ask me to serve"? We would say, "That's not right." No one has a right to say "Anything but that."

Everyone should be ready to serve. A crusty old grump should recognize when someone is sad and say an encouraging word. A tongue-tied traveler can share her faith on an airplane even if she is no evangelist. Almost anyone can watch a child. Because we love each other, we should be willing to help for an hour wherever there is a need. The gospel is our motive. In view of God's mercies, mercies described in the gospel, we offer our bodies as living sacrifices. Candidly talk about spiritual gifts can easily become spiritual self-actualization if I can find my spot, my calling, and live in the middle of my gift-set. This has an element of truth, in a sort of "it would be true except for sin and the fall" sort of way. In the way every economic system communism, socialism or capitalism, would work perfectly all the time if no one ever sinned.

The ideal

God gives gifts, which we offer to each other and to the Lord, as we joyfully present our lives to him. That's the ideal. Let me illustrate through a story. William Bowerman played college football. He started running later in life and became track coach at the Univ. of Oregon for twenty-five years. He was never a great runner, but what a coach! Though he hardly recruited, his teams won four national championships. He revolutionized long distance training, he wrote a best-selling book about it. He did everything he could for his runners. He created lighter running gear, and designed shoes for them. The shoes were so good, he co-founded Nike, with Phil Knight.

Above all, Bowerman knew his runners and tailored their training to their needs and skills. He saw potential in Kenny Moore, a two-miler who saw little success. With a personal best time of 9:15, Moore never won a race until Bowerman analyzed his training. Bowerman chided

Moore, "You train too hard, you train till you're injured or sick." One day Bowerman closed his hands around Moore's throat, lifted him off the ground and demanded a change. Either Moore trained less or he was off the team. Moore submitted; three weeks later he entered a two mile run against Dale Story, the NCAA cross-country champion. Story's time was thirty seconds better than Moore's, but Bowerman ordered Moore not to chase Story and to begin no faster than 4:30 per mile. Moore writes:

"I ran 4:30 for the first mile; Story ran 4:19 and led by 70 yards. Bowerman called, "He won't be able to hold it." I began to gain, and the crowd... 10,000 strong, saw me coming, got up and [shouted]. With half a mile to go I had no real will left, only that thunder that would not let me slow. Into the last turn, Story still had ten yards. Then he looked back, his shoulders tightened, and I learned... how much competitive savagery lay deep in my heart."

"I [beat] him by a second, in 8:48, ripping twenty-seven seconds from my [previous] best. The finish was bedlam...teammates pressing the air out of me, shouting that the Olympics were possible now. Bowerman was there with wild blue eyes and a fiendish grin. I knew what he would say: "I told you so!" But he didn't. He bent to whisper. "Kenny, even I never thought you could run that fast. Even I."⁷

That's how gifts work. Moore was a gifted runner; he did go to the Olympics. But he could never fulfill his potential without a gifted coach. So it is in the church, too. Together we bring out the best.

Our church has a group, mostly women, who are working with refugees from Nepal and other Asian countries, to help them make a life in America. It's service – driving, explaining, helping find jobs, explaining life in America. It's a great ministry, ripe to grow more. We need more servants and helpers, more people who can teach and encourage. And as it grows, it needs some leaders, organizers. Without administration, the work can't continue to grow. Without servants, there is nothing to lead. When we help each other, we can do more than we thought possible. There will be someone up front after the service if you want to talk.

What about you? What gift of service has the Lord given you? If you know and you're engaged, keep it up! Keep going. If not, it's time to pray: Lord show me how I belong to your family, how I can serve generously, diligently, cheerfully – all to offer myself to you Lord, as I consider all your mercies.

⁷ Kenny Moore, "Track and Field's Master Teacher," Sports Illustrated, 24 January, 2000, 41-3.