



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Transformed Gifts

Romans 12.6-8

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Introduction

1. At a preachers meeting, Harold Redd shared a story about the early days of one of the churches in Memphis. He had learned it from a sister who was a charter member of that congregation. Here is how I related the story in a bulletin article shortly after our meeting.

In the early days of the church's existence, upon arrival at the building for services, there would be only six or eight cars in the lot. But, those cars did not represent the number who attended each week. Each car had made two or three trips, picking up people and bringing them to worship. Thus, on many Sundays, the number of worshipers was the same as if there had been twelve to twenty-four cars.¹

2. That group of believers understood two things.
 - a. One was grounded in the direct statements of various Bible passages, including our text: the church members were putting their gifts to work.
 - b. The other was in applying the direct teaching to a method that fit their talents and situation: every week, they were inviting and bringing others to their services.
3. Let's examine what Paul taught about allowing our gifts/talents to be transformed.

Body

- I. Transformation Means Service (12.1-8).
 - A. Remember, the teaching in 12.1-2, itself a conclusion from Romans 1-11, cannot be separated from the application in 12.3-8 (and what follows).
 1. In gratitude for the mercies we have received by grace, we are to live as sacrifices that are living, holy, and acceptable to God (12.1).
 2. This means that we firmly resist the spirit, priorities, and practices of this age (12.2).
 3. It also means that we keep yielding to God's efforts to change us (12.2).
 - B. Doing this leads us to see ourselves and our identities differently.
 1. We don't think of ourselves like the world.
 - a) Typically, "everyone . . . rel[ies] on the power and the right of his own vitality."²

¹ *Southwind (Memphis) Reflector*, "Cars in the Parking Lot," March 18, 2012.

² Karl Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1960), 152.

- b) In contrast, believers are to think according to a standard (as we “ought to think”); we know our lives depend on God and trust in his way (12.3).
 - 2. Consequently, we see ourselves differently in the church: each is one of “many members” in Christ’s body, all with different “functions” and so interconnected that “each member belongs to all the others” (NIV) (12.4-5).
 - C. This radically different outlook cannot help but change how we view our purpose in life.

The exhortation addresses the Christian (12.3-8) in the first place as a member of the Christian Church. The will of God, which, according to 12.2, he ought to know and to which he ought to submit in distinction from the world, consists in this: that he shall regard and conduct his life in the Church as a service (Barth, 152).
 - D. This call to service is not generalized, but specifically focuses on the gifts of each believer, all of whom are called to use them.³
- II. Grace Extended to Function (12.6-8).
- A. We should notice first that the list here is not exhaustive. We know this from a comparison of alternate lists (1 Cor. 12.28-30; Eph. 4.7-16).
 - B. As we examine Paul’s list, we see that the gifts are *functional*.
 - 1. Verse 4 is explicit about this: “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same *function*, . . .” (my emphasis).
 - a) This is not the interpretation of the translators; “function” translates the Greek word *πρᾶξις* (*praxis*).
 - b) James Dunn comments, “[Paul] did not think of spiritual gifts as synonymous with the eye-catching and very physical; the charismatic Spirit came to expression characteristically for him in service, no doubt often hidden from the public eye, in the humdrum maintenance of others in the basics of everyday living, as the Spirit of the crucified.”⁴
 - 2. Applying this truth.
 - a) Again, we see the importance of the context: these gifts are expected of those who are “living sacrifices” (12.1).
 - b) The gifts are natural extensions of grace (note that the word “grace,” [χάρις, *charis*] in vv. 3, 6 is the the heart of the word “gifts” [χάρισμα, *charisma*] in v. 6).
 - c) It is significant “that there is no sense that some or all of them come with the label ‘ordination’ on them.”⁵ This is about *service*, not position.
 - C. Another thing that stands out is the diversity of the gifts.
 - 1. All are not expected to have the same gifts/ functions (though some might have multiple gifts, e.g., Philip and Stephen).
 - 2. At the same time, all gifts are needed, should be welcomed by all members, and used.

³ Notice the NASB’s italicized “*each of us is to exercise them accordingly*” (ESV: “let us use them”). This reflects the fact that the Greek text literally reads, “having gifts according to the grace given to us different.” The clarifying phrase added by the translators reflects Paul’s intent.

⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38B (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1988), 735.

⁵ N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 2, Chapters 9-16* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), Kindle Electronic Edition: Page 76.

III. Putting Our Gifts to Use.

- A. There must be a *change of perspective*: from “talents” to “gifts” (χάρισμα, *charisma*), the featured word in v. 6.
 1. *Charisma* is the word that gives us our word, “charismatic.”
 - a) Unfortunately, “charismatic” has sometimes been misused and abused.
 - b) “Charismatic” is not an inherently miraculous term; none of the gifts mentioned in this passage involve require miraculous power to function.
 2. It is important, then, to see that that Paul saw *every* member as “charismatic,” i.e., gifted (see Dunn, 734).
 3. That truth should transform our view of service and our abilities.
 - a) Although it is correct to see that the gifts include matters of natural temperament, Paul stresses that they are blessings of grace.
 - b) Grace is a force that can add depth to natural abilities and expand / develop them more as we submit to God’s transforming work.
- B. Seeing the functions here as gifts should lead to a *change of purpose*: “let us use them” (12.6, ESV).
 1. There can be no thought of our having ownership of them to use as we please without consideration for service to God.
 2. We should also think what using them means in light of being living sacrifices (12.1).

Most of the tasks in verses 7 and 8, in fact, involve hard work, and Paul encourages his readers to get ready for it. The passage has a ‘get-your-sleeves-rolled up’ feel to it. Find out what your task is and give yourself to it properly: plan the work, think it through, get up early and get on with it. Expect to work till you’re tired, and to keep at it even on the days when you’re not in the mood. You can’t just play at it when you ‘feel like it’. Christian service isn’t a hobby, though people sometimes think of it like that; it’s a divine calling, and if that calling is to make cups of coffee after church, that needs to be done with energy, care and flair . . . (Wright, 76).

Conclusion

1. In my library are some books of quotations and illustrations, including three that are compilations from *Leadership Journal*. Included in one of them, under the heading of “work” and the subtitles “vocation, devotion” is this statement, attributed to Martin Luther King, Jr.

If a man is to be called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, “Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.”⁶
2. God blesses us with grace and is transforming us into who we should be. He has given us gifts to be used in proportion to the mercies we have received. Let us use them.

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⁶ Edward K. Rowell, ed., *Quotes and Idea Starters for Preaching and Teaching from Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 181.