

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

HUMILITY IN EXERCISING OUR GIFTS

Romans 12:6-8

By

Steven J. Cole

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Romans Lesson 80

Humility in Exercising our Gifts Romans 12:6-8

In my years of studying God's Word, I have found few subjects where there is more widespread difference of opinion than that of spiritual gifts. Different authors define the various gifts in different ways. There is debate over whether all the gifts are still functioning today, or whether some were "sign" gifts that ceased after the apostolic era. There are different views over how many gifts each person has and over how we discover our gifts. Some offer spiritual gift inventories, by which you may supposedly determine what your gift is. Others say that it is a wrong emphasis to try to discover your gift (Gene Getz, *Building Up One Another* [Victor Books], pp. 9-16).

And so I approach Romans 12:6-8 a bit hesitantly, acknowledging that good men differ in their understanding of this topic. In the context, Paul is expanding on 12:3, "For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith." In 12:4-5, he uses the analogy of the church as the body of Christ to show that true humility will recognize and function within this important concept. We are one body in Christ, made up of various members, each with an important function. Thus we are not independent of one another, but rather, interdependent. You need me and I need you in order to grow in Christ and fulfill God's purpose on earth.

Now (12:6-8) Paul shows how the body functions through the variously gifted members. Continuing the humility theme he says:

Humility requires that we each function within the area of our own gifts for the benefit of the whole body.

Paul again emphasizes that whatever gifts we may have are due to God's grace, and thus there is no room for pride. God has graciously given gifts to each of us that we are to use to serve others. We should not despise others' gifts and we should not neglect using our own gifts. Paul lists seven spiritual gifts by way of exam-

ple. I do not know why he picks these seven and not others or why he lists them in the order that he does. A comparison with 1 Corinthians 7:7; 12:8-10, 28-30 and Ephesians 4:11 shows that there are other gifts than these seven. None of the lists are exhaustive and some of the gifts with different names would seem to refer to the same thing (e.g., administration and leadership [1 Cor. 12:28; Rom. 12:8]; helps and serving [1 Cor. 12:28; Rom. 12:7]). No list contains prayer (although it may be under "faith," 1 Cor. 12:9) or music. Some contend that each believer only has one spiritual gift, but I find no Scriptural basis for that view. The apostle Paul seemed to have many gifts, and there is no reason to think that he was unique.

There is also debate over whether there is a correlation between natural abilities and spiritual gifts. Some authors are dogmatic that since these are *spiritual* gifts, they are unrelated to a person's natural abilities. Thus if a gifted teacher comes to Christ, he may not have the gift of teaching. But others argue that God sanctifies a person's natural abilities after he comes to salvation and uses them as spiritual gifts. In this vein, Wayne Grudem defines a spiritual gift (*Systematic Theology* [Zondervan], p. 1016, italics his), "*A spiritual gift is any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church.*" Since all that we are and have, both naturally and spiritually, comes from God, I don't see a problem with the second view.

Also, even though the Holy Spirit gives and empowers the gifts, there is a need for the gifted person to work to develop the gift. A gifted evangelist needs to study biblical evangelism and evangelism in church history so that he can improve his skill in proclaiming the gospel. A gifted teacher needs to study and learn throughout life. A pastor needs to grow in his ability to shepherd people with grace and wisdom. Timothy seemed to be in danger of letting his gift languish through disuse or inattention, and so Paul urges him to kindle it afresh (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6; cf. Col. 4:17).

It is important to remember that almost all of the spiritual gifts have corresponding commandments for all believers. Thus we can't opt out of doing certain things because we claim that it's not our gift. There is a gift of exhortation, but we all are to exhort one another in the things of God. There is a gift of teaching, but we all are to teach one another and teach our children the truths of Scrip-

ture. Some are gifted in evangelism (Eph. 4:11), but we're all commanded to share Christ with the lost. There is a gift of service, but we all must serve. There is a gift of mercy, but we all must show mercy to the suffering. There is a gift of giving, but we're all required to be generous with what God has entrusted to us.

Then we might ask, what is the benefit, if any, of knowing what your spiritual gift is? The answer is that it helps you to know where to focus your time and effort for the greatest impact in God's kingdom. We see this in Acts 6. A controversy arose in the early church because the Hellenistic Jews felt that their widows were being overlooked by the Hebrew believers in the daily serving of food. So we read (Acts 6:2), "So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.'" They directed them to find seven godly men who could take care of the ministry to the widows and then explained (Acts 6:4), "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." It was not that serving tables was beneath the apostles. Rather, they recognized that their gifts were in the realm of prayer and teaching the Word, and they needed to focus there.

We all should be looking for needs in the body and be quick to help, no matter what our spiritual gifts. If you're at a church potluck and the workers need help cleaning up, you don't have to have the gift of serving to run the vacuum or wipe off tables. Just do it! But, if you have the gift of teaching, you should not make cleaning up your main ministry. That is the needed balance.

Another debate centers on the question of whether spiritual gifts are given permanently or whether they may be temporary for a specific situation. Generally, it would seem that the gifts are permanent, as seen by the analogy of the body and Paul's exhortation that a person with one gift should not envy a person with a different gift. The eye is always an eye and the ear an ear, and neither changes or should wish that it was something different.

Coupled with this, does God determine what gifts a person gets or should we pray to receive certain gifts that we lack? Paul makes it clear that gifts are given according to God's sovereign will (1 Cor. 12:11, 18, 28) and thus we should be content to function as God has gifted us. But then why does Paul say (1 Cor. 12:31), "But

earnestly desire the greater gifts" (also, 14:1) if the distribution of gifts is fixed by God's will?

There are two possible answers. First, Paul was speaking to the Corinthian church as a whole, instructing them to seek the gifts in their church gatherings that would result in the greatest edification of the whole body. So he wasn't telling individuals to seek certain gifts, but the church body. Second, if there is an individual application, it would be no different than the matter of salvation. On the one hand, God has sovereignly determined before the world was created who will be saved. On the other hand, sinners are exhorted to call upon the Lord for salvation. Although there is a mystery, both are true.

So perhaps there is a situation where a certain ministry is desperately needed and there is no one else there to meet the need except you. It would be legitimate to cry out to the Lord to give you the ability to meet the need, even if it is not in the area of your lifelong gifts. Perhaps you need unusual discernment to give godly counsel. Even if your normal gift is not discernment, ask God to give you that gift in that situation. Or perhaps the need is to exhort someone to turn from sin, but you normally hate confrontation like the plague. Don't dodge the need; cry out to God to give you the wisdom and courage to exhort.

Before we look at the seven gifts in Romans 12:6-8, let me address one other question: How does a person discover what his or her spiritual gifts are? I'm not a fan of spiritual gift inventories. I suppose they may be of some help, but too often people trust these to lock in on some supposed gift that they have and it boxes them in so that they are not open to other possibilities.

First, to discover your gifts, get involved in serving in a number of different ministries. As has often been said, God only directs moving vehicles. So start serving and if God needs to redirect you, He will. As you serve, you will discover that you enjoy doing some things more than others. God uses our desires to direct us. This doesn't mean that you will find your area of gift easy to do. I find teaching God's Word to be difficult and stressful. But like all hard work, there is satisfaction after the work is done.

Also, when you serve in a certain area that you're gifted in, God will give a measure of blessing so that others will comment on how much your ministry meant to them. When I first started to teach the Bible, way back in my college years, I was surprised when people would come up to me weeks later and tell me that God had used something I said in their lives. After this happened a few times, I began to discern that God might use me in teaching. Also, over the years, my efforts at personal evangelism have yielded little fruit, at least as far as I know. But ministering to believers to help them grow or understand the Christian life has often yielded fruit. So I think that I have the gift of pastor-teacher.

Here's a final way to discern your gift that may surprise you: What do you complain about in the church? People tend to complain in their area of giftedness. Gifted teachers complain that the teaching is weak. Those gifted in administration grumble about the church being poorly organized. Those gifted in mercy gripe that the church neglects the shut-ins. Those gifted in evangelism shake their heads at the lack of interest in outreach. And so it goes. The solution, of course, is to quit complaining and start serving in your area of giftedness, so that the church will improve in that area.

Also I should point out that there is not necessarily a correlation between the effectiveness of a person's gift and that person's spiritual maturity. Someone may be a gifted evangelist, but he is spiritually immature, so that his life is not a good advertisement for the gospel. The enemy often uses this to bring dishonor to the name of Christ. We all should be growing in maturity and be careful that if God grants us great results in some ministry, our lives are Christ-like and do not cause a scandal for the gospel.

I'm going to dodge the difficult question of whether all of the spiritual gifts are valid for today, except to say that I cannot find biblical support for the view that the so-called "sign" gifts ceased completely and permanently at the end of the apostolic era. On the other hand, we need to test the gifts against the New Testament (1 Thess. 5:20-21; 1 John 4:1). On that basis, I am very skeptical of most of what is claimed to be speaking in tongues and miraculous healing today. The genuine gift of tongues is the miraculous ability to speak in a foreign language that you have not studied, but most "tongues" today is just gibberish. And the so-called "faith healers"

who put on crusades and appeal for money are a bunch of spiritual hucksters, preying on gullible people.

With that as a very lengthy introduction, let's briefly work through the seven gifts of Romans 12:6-8:

1. The one with the gift of prophecy should humbly serve according to the proportion of his faith.

There's a lot of controversy and difficulty in defining this gift. Wayne Grudem has written a book, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament & Today* [Crossway, 1988], arguing that this gift, properly defined, is valid for the church today. He distinguishes between the apostolic gift of prophecy, which transmitted authoritative revelation to the church and this spiritual gift, which required evaluation and discernment to determine its application and validity. He defines it (*Systematic Theology*, p. 1049, italics his) as "*telling something that God has spontaneously brought to mind.*" But many argue that this gift only functioned in apostolic times and is not valid today. I think that Dr. Grudem's arguments are largely convincing.

When Paul says that he should prophesy "according to the proportion of his faith," I understand him to mean that the prophet must not be governed by his emotions or his love of speaking, but must only speak what God has given him to speak (John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 123; Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Christian Conduct* [Banner of Truth], pp. 239-240). Also, the prophet must speak everything that God has given him to speak, not holding back difficult truth (Lloyd-Jones, *ibid.*). Most authors distinguish prophecy from teaching by saying that the prophet received immediate revelation from God, whereas the teacher studied the Scriptures to explain and apply them.

Some authors (John Calvin, Charles Hodge) argue that Paul is saying that the prophet must speak "according to the analogy of the faith" (the Greek word for "proportion" is *analogia*). In other words, his speaking must be in line with inspired Scripture. While that is true, I doubt that it is Paul's meaning here. I understand "according to the proportion of his faith" to be in line with verse 3, "as God has allotted to each a measure of faith." So Paul is referring to the faith of the prophet. Paul means that he must be careful to trust in God and not go beyond what God has given him to say.

I don't have time to go into how this gift may be used in our church. I am open to it being exercised in a careful manner, where someone may sense very strongly that God has revealed some insight that we need to know regarding the ministry here. It may be a warning or an encouragement (1 Cor. 14:3). On rare occasions, the Lord may reveal something about the future that we need to know (Acts 11:27-29). But all prophecies need to be evaluated by those who hear them and not just swallowed whole (1 Cor. 14:29, 32).

2. The one with the gift of service should humbly serve.

"If service, in his serving..." (12:7). In other words, if you are a servant, then do it. The gift of service often takes place behind the scenes, but if it is not done, everyone notices. If we went to distribute the communion elements, but no one had bought the juice or made the bread or filled the trays and no one was ready to pass out the trays, you would notice. Faithful servants make these things and many more things happen around here every week. It's a valuable gift!

3. The one with the gift of teaching should humbly teach.

"Or, he who teaches, in his teaching..." (12:7). After telling Timothy not to neglect his spiritual gift, Paul goes on to tell him (1 Tim. 4:15-16), "Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all. Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things" In other words, just because you're gifted in teaching doesn't mean that it comes easily. Don't just wing it. Work hard at it.

4. The one with the gift of exhortation should humbly exhort.

"Or he who exhorts, in his exhortation..." (12:8). There is obviously some overlap between the gifts of teaching and exhortation. Usually the difference is one in emphasis. John Murray (*ibid.*, p. 125) says, "As teaching is directed to the understanding, so is exhortation to the heart, conscience, and will." I think that all teaching should contain this element of exhortation or application of the truth. God's Word is not meant just to fill our heads with information, but to transform our lives (Rom. 12:2).

5. The one with the gift of giving should humbly give with pure motives.

“He who gives, with liberality...” (12:8). The word translated “liberality” may mean generosity. Or, it may mean simplicity, where the idea is that he must give with pure motives. He should not use his gifts manipulatively, to gain power or status. He should give as to the Lord to meet legitimate needs. Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) are a negative example of this principle.

6. The one with the gift of leadership should humbly lead with diligence.

“He who leads, with diligence...” (12:8). This verb may mean to give aid or engage in good deeds (Titus 3:8, 14), but most commentators understand it here to mean “to lead.” Paul uses it this way to describe church leaders (1 Thess. 5:12), including both elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3:4, 5, 12; 5:17). “With diligence” means that you can’t be a passive leader. You must take initiative, whether in leading your family or the church. Leaders must see problems that need attention and work through others to provide solutions, giving appropriate oversight.

7. The one with the gift of mercy should humbly show mercy with cheerfulness.

“He who shows mercy, with cheerfulness” (12:8). People who are suffering can tell whether you’re there helping them as a duty or because you genuinely care for them. They don’t need to hear about how much you’re sacrificing to help them. They need a cheerful countenance that helps point them to the Lord as their strength. A cheerful disposition leaves the suffering one with hope.

Conclusion

Even if you don’t agree with all the details that I’ve shared, we all should agree with several practical implications of Paul’s teaching here. First, there should not be any benchwarmers in the body of Christ. Every member has been given some gift and the Lord didn’t give you a gift to bury it and wait for His return. So if you’re not serving, look around, figure out what needs to be done, and get on with doing it!

Second, we should not boast in our own gifts and belittle or criticize those who don’t have the same gifts as we do. God graciously gave us whatever gifts we have. We don’t deserve them. It’s a great privilege to serve the Lord who has saved us. And you need

the gifts of others, so receive their ministry and affirm them for doing it. Serve the Lord and His church with humility.

Third, don't envy the gifts of others. God made you who you are and what He gave you to do is important for the functioning of the body. We should cooperate, not compete with one another.

I close with a story that illustrates how we should cooperate, not compete. Years ago in a Special Olympics, the boys were running the 220. One runner named Andrew was faster than the others. As he came around the corner of the track, he was about 50 yards ahead of everyone. Everyone was standing at the finish line, yelling at Andrew, "Come on! Come on!" But out of the corner of his eye, he could see his best friend in the far lane fall. Andrew ignored the ones yelling for him to win. He went back, picked up his fallen friend by the hand and together they crossed the finish line in last place to the cheers of those in the stands.

Did Andrew win? It depends on how you define "win." If winning is coming in first, Andrew lost. He came in last. But if winning is caring for and working together with your brother, Andrew won. That's how we are supposed to use our gifts to serve one another in the body of Christ.

Application Questions

1. Why is humility essential in the exercise of spiritual gifts? What can happen when it is forgotten?
2. What are some gifts not listed in the NT which may be used in ministry? Is it important to know whether they are "spiritual" or "natural" gifts? Why/why not?
3. What is your view of the miraculous "sign" gifts? What Scriptures support your view? Which militate against it?
4. Would you agree that every Christian is "in the ministry"? Is there a biblical distinction between "clergy" and "laity"? If so, what is it? If not, what practical implications follow?

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