

## **Romans 12:3-8**

In verses 1 and 2 Paul has addressed the important issue of our relationship with God—he's looking for committed people. In verse 3 he expands his thinking as he encourages us to come up with an honest appraisal of who and what we are. The man's a fool who thinks he has it all! The fact is, we haven't! We have our plus points sitting uncomfortably alongside our negative feelings, we have our strengths and our weaknesses, we have God given talents and a range of human deficiencies—that's the way it is, that's the way we are, and the sooner we face up to it the better!

Hence Paul's gracious appeal for us to take quality time out and evaluate where we're at in our relationship with God and others – it's essential for us to do it regularly and frequently, not that we become self absorbed and introspective, nor that we end up with super inflated egos either. It's a matter of striking a good healthy balance in our personal appraisal.

We're not meant to be so hard on ourselves that we knock the stuffing out of our faith, nor are we to be so easy that we give ourselves a quick once-over and plod on regardless. The need is for us to be honest before God, honest with ourselves, and honest with those around us. We do ourselves no favours if we think we can pull a quick one on the Almighty!

Paul wants us at the end of the exercise to emerge stronger and better for having taken the whole thing seriously. The process may be painful, but it should yield satisfactory results—we're looking for realism in our quest to find our potential realised in God. When we've done it, as it were, we'll be content with our place in God's programme. There will be a genuine feeling of quiet satisfaction that we can be and will be all that God wants us to be.

That's not being conceited, or smug, or self sufficient, or even proud—far from it! It's nothing more than an acceptance of who and what we are in God. There's no mileage in over rating ourselves. By the same token, there's no point in underselling

ourselves either. At the end of the day it boils down to personal integrity—our integrity before God as we lay our heart and life bare before him. In God’s presence, it’s much better to have a big heart than a big head!

We’ll pause for a short music break and, when we come back, we’ll take the lid off Paul’s thinking on body ministry.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

The next few verses, running down to verse 8, take us back to the context of the local church—the place where God’s people exercise their unique gifting and where believers have to get on with one another. Paul uses one of his favourite analogies—he sees the church as a body and, consequently, God’s people are individual members of that same body. You’ll remember that’s the same image Paul used in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 when talking along similar lines.

Before we get into the nitty-gritty of the text, it seems to me there are two basic principles we need to get a handle on: the first one, the church is composed of many members and, the second, the church’s members are interrelated.

To put it simply, we’re all in it together and, when it comes to your ministry and mine, we need each other. We have a special ministry to those around us in today’s world, for people need the Lord; we also have an engaging ministry with each other in the international family of God. That means in the local church there is no place for spiritual Lone Rangers. We need a Tonto in each of our lives!

If you take a moment and look at your body right now, you will be amazed to discover there’s only one! You don’t have two or three bodies—there’s only one, for better or worse! That tells me it is supremely important. I wouldn’t be here if it was not for my body—it’s the vehicle through which my personality is revealed. It’s the means by which God enables me to get on in life. The body is vital, it is essential—the reality is, the body is nothing without its different members! We have arms and legs, feet and hands, big parts, little parts, some parts you see, other parts remain unseen.

Whatever, each part has a key role to play if the body is going to function the way God intended. And, if the body is going to perform to its maximum potential, all the parts have to be in good running order. Efficiency and effectiveness are only achieved when each part is doing its bit. Problems come when one part eases off or decides to perform sluggishly.

You don't have to push the allusion too far to realise what Paul is getting at when he writes the way he does. There is no room for a mindset of individualism in the body, there is no place for an isolationist approach to life and ministry. He's not flying the flag for independence, he's going down the road of inter-dependence. Paul advocates an all inclusive framework—it's the one in, all in, syndrome. In that sense, we are community. We are not all the same, but we are all one! Yes, there is a real sense of unity—allied to that is a rich vein of diversity.

Our spiritual DNA enables us to work together as the body of Christ on planet earth—we are his hands, his feet, his voice. We share a common life, a common ministry, a common power and, above all, a common Head.

By the grace of God, we all have something to offer each other, we all have something to contribute to the body as a whole—it seems to me, this is body ministry, pure and simple.

I think it's time for a short music break. In a moment or two I want us to look at the list of spiritual gifts that Paul details for us in verses 6-8.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

We're looking now at verses 6-8 where Paul outlines for us a number of spiritual gifts and how best to use them! There's no point in having a gift if it's not going to be used—as they say, use it or lose it! When we use it to God's glory, we're blessed, and so too is the church of Jesus Christ.

I read recently of a retired farmer in a small prairie town in Saskatchewan, Canada, who owns a large collection of rare and valuable violins. It is highly unlikely that anyone will play those

marvellous instruments as long as they are simply stored, protected, and admired. But in the hands of accomplished musicians, those violins could be making beautiful music to inspire and bless countless thousands of hearers.

That's the way it is with so many Christians—they keep their spiritual gift under wraps, under lock and key, rather than using them to serve the Lord.

It's amazing how cherished customs differ in various cultures. For example, in Europe and in America many mothers are keen to preserve their children's first shoes in bronze, perhaps to represent freedom and independence, whereas many Japanese mothers preserve a small part of the child's umbilical cord, to represent dependence and loyalty.

Those two words, dependence and loyalty, beautifully describe the interrelationship the Lord desires for the members of his body, the church. Those are core values that we share in the local assembly of God's people and they flourish and blossom when we exercise our spiritual gifts among one another.

Gifts are not given for us to engage in acts of showmanship, my gift doesn't mean that I'm a better Christian than you are. All of us have been individually gifted by God—the word that Paul used in verse 6 is charisma which comes from the Greek word charis which means grace. God's gift to you is a generous act on his part, it's a token of his love for you, he has gifted us in grace—we're not supposed to flaunt our gifts, we're meant to use them, and use them well.

I agree with Warren Wiersbe when he says that 'spiritual gifts are tools to build with, not toys to play with or weapons to fight with.' Every believer has been allocated a minimum of one gift and it's up to us to find out what it is then employ it to the glory of God.

There's no point in me looking with green envious eyes at your gift and wishing it was mine—it doesn't work that way! God has given us what he believes is best for us and he is not impressed when we covet another man's gifting.

It seems to me that Paul is saying: 'Look, folks, be yourself, be God's man in your town, be God's woman in your church—be the person God wants you to be! There's only one of you, and there's only one of Him, but together, what a team!'

We'll pause for another quick break and, when we come back, I want us to look at each of the gifts that Paul details in turn. The first one is prophesying!

### **MUSIC BREAK**

Paul tells us in verse 6: 'If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.' It's fairly obvious from the way Paul puts it that not everyone has this particular gift—it's only given to certain individuals. When a gifted man opens his mouth, people will recognise his gifting—by the same token, if someone stands up to minister who isn't gifted, people will also know it a mile away! A gift like this is a priceless gift when exercised in public and in private—whether in front of a congregation or with a handful of folks in a home, a gifted speaker will be a source of blessing to all those gathered. Such an anointed person will always have something to say, and what they say will always be well worth listening to! It's not the word of man, it's the precious word of God. A person with this gift is no more than God's voice in a given situation.

There may be times when this gift has a predictive element to it, and that's fine. The norm, however, is that it will be a case of sharing the revealed truth of Scripture to people. Such a person is uniquely gifted to communicate the message of God in a way that will cause people to sit up and take notice. Their response to the message is not his responsibility, it's up to them how they handle the challenge of biblical truth, that's what they will be held accountable for in a coming day.

The qualifying phrase at the end of verse 6 has raised a heckle or two over the years: 'let him use it in proportion to his faith'. At face value, it would seem as if Paul was saying, when a man prophesies, he is to do it according to the level of his personal faith! That's not

what Paul has in mind, at all! The 'faith' is a reference to the body of truth revealed in the word of God—in other words, his prophesying is to be rooted in Scripture, his is an authentically biblical message. It is God's word—nothing more, nothing less, nothing else!

Paul then talks about 'serving'. That is the same word from which we get our word: deacon, it has the idea of serving each other and doing it with a heart and a half. It doesn't say what kind of service is anticipated here; that implies everything we do is to be done with a towel in one hand and a basin of water in the other. That's the mindset!

We're not here to stand on ceremony and we're not here to tramp on toes, we're here to serve, and we're here to do it joyfully and willingly. It seems to carry a meaning similar to that of the gift of 'helps' mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:28—it's the kind of practical help that we can give to one another in Jesus' name.

Number three on the list is 'teaching'. It seems that teaching is a little different from prophecy in that it instructs the mind, whereas prophecy is addressed more to the heart and will. Teaching is more concerned with knowledge, prophecy with revelation.

The Christian who teaches is divinely gifted with a special ability to interpret and present God's truth in a fashion that people will understand it. He'll not go over their heads and leave them floundering and wondering: 'what on earth was that all about?'

Such a person has the uncanny knack of making the profound splendidly simple. It has to be said that a good teacher will always have keen pupils—folks who want to know more and learn more.

Paul highlights another four gifts in verse 8, the first of these is the wonderful ministry of 'encouraging'. That's the Barnabas syndrome. There's no point in giving flowers to people when they're dead, best to give them when they're alive! Such is the vital role of an encourager—the long term benefits of their life enhancing ministry cannot be overestimated. Folks with this gift are worth their weight in gold, they are priceless.

Mind you, it can be tough out there—not everyone appreciates the role of this kind of individual, but most of us need them at some point. Such folk have the ability to come close and cheer us up in one way or another. The danger is they can be easily taken for a ride or taken for granted. Nevertheless, they keep on going and expending themselves to God’s praise.

Paul then talks about the person who ‘[contributes] to the needs of others’. When engaged in such a ministry, these folk are to do it ‘generously’ or with simplicity. Basically that proviso is to challenge our motive for giving to others. Why do I give to my brother or sister in their hour of need? Why do I give to a particular mission or church appeal?

Paul is desperately keen to avoid a repeat of the Ananias and Sapphira incident. That’s how not to give! When we do give to others we’re best to do it in secret, that is, between them and us and the Lord. Nine times out of ten, there’s no real need for others to be in on it anyway! And it’s best kept that way.

That means the Lord gets all the glory for what has happened. On top of that, it means those on the receiving end are not left with a red embarrassed look on their face. When it comes to giving, it’s best to say nothing about it, and just do it!

The last but one is the hugely important gift of leadership—to that Paul attaches a cautionary note: ‘let him govern diligently’. Those who exercise spiritual leadership in the local church are not to ‘wing’ it. There is no place for leaders becoming casual or careless in fulfilling their responsibilities, nor is there any need for them to start throwing their weight around either.

A gifted leader is conscious of the privilege God has entrusted to him, he’s also aware of the solemn responsibility resting on his shoulder. The thought behind the word ‘diligence’ is that of zeal, enthusiasm, commitment, and earnestness. Such folks are to be serious about their calling before God! Leadership in the church is no laughing matter. The word also carries the idea of ‘haste’ in the sense that such folk will take decisions rather than put off until

tomorrow what should be done today! They will be careful and consistent in their leadership.

The last one is spelt out beautifully for us when Paul says: if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. It means there will be those in the church who are able to get alongside those who are suffering and bereaved. This is a tremendous ministry—a ministry to those going through hard times. Such gifted folks will brighten up their day, they will cheer them up! Someone has rightly said: ‘if you come with sympathy to sorrow, bring God’s sunlight in your face.’ In other words, don’t be a Job’s comforter!

So much for the gifts that Paul has outlined—it’s a matter of us finding our niche in the kingdom of God, discovering our gift and then using it to his praise and glory. When we do that, we are fantastically blessed, the church is seriously enriched, and the world is a better place.