

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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Romans 12:3-6a “The Believer’s Function in the Church”

Intro. In our last two messages we have seen that God commands us to present our bodies as living sacrifices to Him. This is a call for total commitment, isn’t it? He also commands us to be not conformed to this present evil age, but to allow Him to transform our lives. Those are some general, foundational commands concerning how we are to live our lives as Christians.

Beginning with our text today, Paul shows how the believer’s consecration to God (vv. 1-2) is carried out in the performance of specific duties.

It is significant that Paul begins with our relationship to the church. That is the most important area of your Christian life. You may be outwardly living a moral life, but if you are not serving God in a local church, you are living in disobedience to these verses.

Our Nominating Committee worked most of the summer to fill the various service positions of our church. With the cooperation of many members, they have been able to fill 98% or more of all the positions in our church. But if we are willing to serve the Lord and His church, we would have no trouble filling 100% of the service positions. Every member of this church should ask, “What does God want me to do to help this church to fulfill our mission?” Is attending church from time to time enough? Is giving a few dollars enough? Let’s answer these questions as we look at this passage together.

First of all, if we are going to be good members of the church, we need to understand:

I. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

You are not going to carry out your role & function in the church if you do not understand what the church is. Well in this text of Scripture Paul compares the Church to a human body. The church is not just an organization; it is a living organism, just like a human body. And as a human body has diversity, unity, and interdependence, even so the Christian community is to have diversity, unity, and interdependence. So we need to understand the fact that:

A. There Is Diversity among the Membership – Paul says in v.4 that “we have many members in one body.” The human body is made up of many different members, such as the hands, arms, legs, feet, eyes, nose, ears, etc. The human body is also made up of many different vital organs.

Why is it that God designed the body with so many different body parts? Well Paul goes on to say in v.4, “but all the members do not have the same function.” The word translated “function” (*praxis*) refers to an activity or function. Your lungs have a different function within the body than the heart. The lungs do a good job of delivering oxygen and expelling carbon dioxide, but they would do a poor job of anything else. My hands are good at holding & moving things, but they are not good for walking.

A football team¹ provides a good illustration of the need for diversity from many different members of the team. On offense, you need to really big guys on the line to block. You need some strong, fast guys with good moves to be running backs. You need tall, fast guys with good hands to be wide receivers. You need a quarterback who is pretty smart, and a good leader. He needs to have a good arm, and it helps if he has some speed to avoid getting sacked. And then you have to have a kicker. He does need to be very big or fast. He just needs to be able to kick the ball a good distance, and with accuracy.

Even so, the church is made up of many different members. We now have over 600 members, and there is great diversity among the membership, for God never intended the members of the church to all be alike. Now we are all to be like Christ morally and spiritually, but we are not all to be alike in terms of our service and function in the church. Some have leadership roles. Some others are to teach. Most others are to carry out some service role within the church. We have differences in talents and spiritual gifts. We have differences in personalities. We have differences in many other ways. And these differences enable us to carry out all the different functions and ministries that are needed in a church to fulfill our mission.

This means that we are not to discourage diversity, and expect everyone to be alike. We need to appreciate our differences.

Now even though there is diversity among the members of the Body of Christ:

B. Yet, There Must also Be Unity among the Membership – Paul goes on to say in v.5, “so we, being many, are one body in Christ...” Even though there needs to be diversity in function, and in other ways, we are all to come together as one in terms of our loyalty to Christ, and in terms of our core theological beliefs, and in terms of our mission. Jesus prayed in John 17 that His people would be one. God never intended the Christian to live as a separate entity from the Church, the Body of Christ.

Can you imagine what it would be like if there were no unity to the members of my body? Imagine that I could come to church in 100 different body parts. My mouth might be on the pulpit speaking while my eyes are rolling around the room looking for people who are sleeping! That may sound good until you realize that the members of the body cannot survive without maintaining unity. Separate my eye from my body and it will not live long, will it?

Even so, maintaining unity with the rest of the body of Christ is important, and maintaining unity with Christ, the Head, is absolutely essential. There is no way you can maintain good spiritual health if you do not remain in good fellowship with a local church. And when there is division within the body of Christ, our witness is adversely affected. If Christians have trouble being reconciled to one another, how can we tell sinners to be reconciled to God? When there is division, we are spiritually unhealthy. We have to divert attention away from our primary mission to the task of bringing healing to the body.

So as we seek to maintain unity with one another as one body, let’s understand what that involves unity of purpose. Every member should be working together in a variety of ministries and roles to accomplish our common mission. For example, let’s say that your body is going to compete in a race. For you to win, each member of your body has to work together to achieve that goal, performing its own function. The heart needs to start beating faster, the lungs need to start breathing faster, the muscles need to work harder, and so forth.

Even so, if the church is going to reach the objective given to us by Christ, we must all work together to achieve that common purpose. That means we need to understand what our

¹ Adapt to whatever sport season we are in.

mission is. We are to reach the lost for Christ. We are to help believers grow in their faith, and become more like Jesus. We are to help those who have needs in Jesus' name. We are to worship the Lord & bring glory to Him. This unity of purpose makes it imperative that each perform his or her duty for the good of the whole.

Now in order to promote unity, we need to understand yet another truth about the Body of Christ:

C. There Is also Interdependence among the Membership – Notice that Paul says in the last of v.5 that we are “individually members of one another.” We must maintain harmony within the body because we are so interdependent. We are all members of the same body.

Let's imagine the heart getting mad at the lungs and saying, “Well, I'm not going to give the lungs any more blood.” But when that happens, the hearts soon finds out that it is not getting any more oxygen. Each member is interdependent. When one member isn't functioning well, the other members will suffer for it.

Even so, it's like someone saying, “I'm not going to sing in the choir any more.” Well if that happens, the Body is affected. Or, “I'm not going to serve in the nursery anymore.” If that happens, the Body is affected. Or “I'm not going to serve on that committee any more.” When that happens, the other members of the body of Christ are affected. That's because we are all interdependent together. It is so important that each of us carries out our role within the church for the common good. (Now there are times when you need to quit something that God has not enabled you to do, but that's not my point here.)

Now because each member is interdependent, that means:

1. Each Member Is Important – Even the pastor needs something spiritual from the members to whom he ministers. Some people tend to think, “That church doesn't need me. What I do isn't important.” But that's not true. The church needs you to carry out your proper role within the church. If you think your hand is not important, just cut it off and see how well you can function without it. So we should not underestimate our importance or value in the church. If we do, we will tend to fail to use the gift that God has given us. We should not regard a member as unimportant. Even a young child is important to this church. Think of the joy the children bring to us. Some of these dear children bring friends or even parents to church. They are important. Even the Senior Adult who is no longer able bodied is still important to this church. They pray. They give. They make phone calls, checking on others. They can share wisdom from a lifetime of experience. Every member of the Body of Christ is important. Don't say to yourself, “That church doesn't need me. I have nothing to offer to that church.” However:

2. No Member Is All Important – Certain members of the body of Christ who have great and visible gifts tend to overestimate their own importance. They develop spiritual superiority. Paul said in 1 Cor. 12:21, “And the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’” And for a Christian to minimize the other gifts & functions while he emphasizes his own gift & function is to deny the very purpose for which gifts are given; the benefit of the whole Body of Christ. This tends to create jealousy & dissention within the Body. My hand is important to me, but if it were to be cut off, I would still survive with proper medical care. So don't think for a minute that the church would just fall apart and die if you were to leave and quit your work here. That is part of what Paul is seeking to get across in v.3, “For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think....” Paul warns everyone that in the body of Christ we are not to think more highly of our function in the body than we ought.

This exhortation would not be first in the list if too high an estimation of self were not a common failing among Christians. This is a problem with some pastors and church leaders. Also, some think of themselves as too important to have anything less than the most visible spiritual gifts and responsibilities. The Corinthians had a problem with seeking the showy gifts. They had the mind-set of Diotrephes, who sought preeminence within his church (3 John 9). James addressed the problem when he told his readers not to be so eager to be teachers because of the great responsibility involved (3:1). Be satisfied with the gifts God has given you.

There is no place for spiritual big-headedness. There is no room for highmindedness in the man who owes everything he has to God (1 Cor. 4:7). Christ has given us His estimation of our own abilities in His famed sentence, "Without me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5). The man who accepts that verdict can become something for God. Surely the believer who is proud of a gift that has been bestowed by the Holy Spirit is taking to himself the glory which belongs to God. If we consider ourselves to possess gifts we do not have, then we have an inflated notion of our place and function. But if we underestimate, then we are refusing to acknowledge God's grace and we fail to exercise that which God has dispensed for our own sanctification and that of others.

So instead of thinking of ourselves "more highly" than we ought, we are "to think soberly" (*sophroneo*), which means to be of sound mind; be reasonable, sensible. To be highminded is a form of spiritual insanity. We cannot function as a body if each person is inflating his own importance and diminishing the importance of other's work.

II. THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH

This is not stated as clearly here in Romans as it is in Ephesians (5:23) and Colossians (1:18; 2:19). But this truth is at least implied here. The body must have a head, a brain, to control and direct the many different members of the body. Jesus is the Head of the church. As Head,

A. He Leads the Church – The Head contains the mind which directs the body. It is not the foot that is supposed to tell the other members what to do, but the head. Not even the pastor is to rule the church, but the pastor is like the mouth of the body. He is to study and pray to find out God's will for the body, and instruct the body from God's Word and lead the body to do the will of God. As individual members we are to seek from Christ how we are to function.

I understand that it is supposed to get up to 68° tomorrow. Let's suppose that my hand decides that it would like to hold a golf club tomorrow. It wants to drive the ball 250 yards down the fairway. It wants to hit the green with the next shot. It wants to sink a 30 foot putt. Some of you are thinking that my hand is only dreaming! Now my hand may want to play golf, but my head tells me that I need to work tomorrow. Now which part of my body is in charge? My head must be in charge!

Even so, Jesus is the head of the church. He rules the Church. Individual members should not rule the church except to the extent that we have been given Scriptural authority to lead on behalf of Christ. We allow members to vote, but even then, we are to vote in accordance to what we believe the will of God to be. If we do not all submit to Christ the Head, and the leadership that He has ordained within the church (Hebrews 13:17), then there will be disunity and division within the Body. That leads to all kinds of problems.

Furthermore, as Head of the Body of Christ:

B. He Equips the Members of the Church – According to our text, He does this in two particular ways:

1. He Endows Us With a Spiritual Gifted to Enable Us Serve Him in a Particular Way – At this time of the year we think about giving gifts. Well, Christ has given you a spiritual gift. Paul says in v.6, “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them...” Each member of the body of Christ has a function to perform and a gift to enable us to serve effectively in that ministry. Though we should use our natural born talents for the Lord, that is not what Paul has in mind here. Rather, he has in mind those spiritual gifts that you receive when you are born again by the Spirit of God. So notice some of the truths about these gifts that we should be aware of:

a. These Are Sovereign Gifts – This is clearly stated in 1 Cor. 12:11 where Paul states that the Lord distributes the gifts “as He wills.” The Head decides which gifts we receive. You are not to say to the Lord, “God, I don’t like the gift that you have given me. I don’t want to have the gift of service; I would rather be a preacher or singer or teacher.” It is not for us to decide what role we will have within the church. That is the Lord’s decision.

b. These Are Grace Gifts – In v.6 Paul mentions the fact that these are grace gifts, for that is the meaning of the word translated “gifts” (*charisma*). Also, Paul specifically states, “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us...” No one earns their gift by good works or by religious accomplishments. No one can buy a certain gift with a large donation (Acts 8:18). God does not give a person the gift of preaching or teaching as some reward. It is given purely by His grace. If you have one of the gifts that seems to be more desirable, it is not because you are better than someone else in the Body.

This is one reason why Paul said in v.3, “For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think...” Paul understood this truth regarding his own ministry. When he mentions “the grace given to me,” he is specifically thinking of the grace bestowed upon him in his apostolic commission. His calling and giftedness to be an apostle of the Lord was only by the grace of God.

c. There Are Supernatural Gifts – We are quite sure that believers have received gifts that are above and beyond their natural capacities. In fact, Christ did not found His church by means of intellectual giants but by means of humble, common men who, when filled with the Holy Spirit, were amazingly effective in the hands of God. In this manner, all the glory goes to God and none of it rests with man.

There is a second way Christ equips His church for ministry:

2. He Gives Us the Faith We Need to Exercise These Gifts – Paul says in the last of v.3 that “God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.” The last part of this verse is difficult to interpret, but Paul emphasizes that God has distributed a measure, or sufficient amount, of faith to each one; no one is excluded. He is not talking about saving faith but the faith needed to exercise our gifts. Why is this distinguishing endowment spoken of as a “measure of faith?” It is called the measure of faith in the restricted sense of the faith that is suited to the exercise of this gift. It takes faith to step out and do a certain ministry, trusting God to help you do that ministry by means of a spiritual gift. No gift is exercised apart from faith directed to God. So not only is the gift from God, but the exercise of the gift requires the aid of God. So highmindedness is again excluded.

God called me to preach, and to teach His Word. At the time, I had no natural ability to do what God was calling me to do. I stuttered and stammered. I could not speak well at all, especially in front of a group of people. But I learned that what God calls you to do, He will

equip you to do if you will only step out on faith. I did that the day after my 18th birthday, when I announced my call to preach in front of about 1,000 people in my home church in Rome, Georgia. God was indeed true to His Word.

Even so, God may be calling you to be a teacher, and if so, trust Him to enable you to be effective in that role. We still need a leader so we can have a children's choir. Is God calling you to work with children, and teach them some songs? Then step out of faith and say, "Here am I, send me." And this leads to my last main point:

III. EXERCISE YOUR GIFTS!

In the second part of v.6, Paul indicated that the one who has a gift from the Holy Spirit is to use it, and in the remaining verses Paul tells us how they are to be used. In our next message from Romans we will get into the specifics of what some of the gifts are, and how they are to be used. But for now, I want to appeal to you to make a commitment to serve the Lord faithfully in the local church in the ways that you do know you are gifted in. We are the body of Christ in this world. His work is our work.

During World War II one of the churches that was destroyed was St. Mark's in Frankfort, Germany. When the roof collapsed, a statue of Christ was buried in the ruins. After the war, people were cleaning up the site and discovered the statue of Christ. The problem was the hands had been broken off and were destroyed. The leaders of the church determined that they would place the statue in a prominent location without the hands. The reason was that it would be a stark reminder that we are the hands of Christ in this world.²

Folks, when it comes to ministry in our world, Christ has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet, no voice but our voice. I also challenge you to commit yourself to learning more about the spiritual gifts, and have a willing spirit to serve in whatever way the Lord leads you and enables you.

Conclusion: I trust that by now you understand the nature of the church. We are the Body of Christ. Therefore, we need to embrace the need for diversity within the Body. Let not our differences divide us, but enable us to fulfill all the various aspects of our mission. We also need to strive for unity within the Body. A house divided will fall. We will be more likely to maintain unity when we understand how interdependent we are.

Furthermore, God has provided the means for effective ministry in the church. He has ordained leadership for the Body, beginning with Christ the Head. He has gifted the Body with spiritual gifts. And He has given us the faith we need to exercise our gifts. Are you functioning within the Body of Christ? About half of our members do not even attend the church with any regularity. How can they carry out their function within the Church? Others are regular attenders, but they are not reaching their potential in helping us fulfill our mission as a church. Will you make a commitment to serve as a functioning member of Swift Creek Baptist Church?

Then there are those who attend, but have not joined. Some say, "Well, I'm a Christian, but I don't want to belong to any church." That's like saying, "I'm a football player, but I don't want to be a part of any team." That's like saying, "I'm a tuba player, but I don't want to be a part of an orchestra." That just doesn't work. A Christian needs to be a member of a church. [Illus.#C-1074]. Could it be that the Lord would lead you to join this local church today? We

² J. Michael Shannon, "To Illustrate" in Preaching (January-February 2007), 73 [Illus.#C-1690].

need you to have a more effective ministry, and you cannot be a fully functioning part of a local church without becoming a member of that church.

If you are not yet a Christian, you need to be saved before you can truly become a member of the Body of Christ. You can lie about being saved and get your name on the church roll without being saved, but you can't become a true member of the Body of Christ without giving your heart to Christ. Will you come forward during the invitation, and let me lead you in a prayer to trust in Christ as Savior?

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 4, "God's Discipline" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); John MacArthur, Jr., *A Living Sacrifice: Study Notes on Romans 12:1-8* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1987); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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