



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

One Body, Many Members

Romans 12:3-9

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We launched into Romans 12 last Sunday with verses 1 and 2. Today we'll continue, starting with verse 3. Paul tells us here what it means to be the Church and it's hard to read these verses without sort of hearing him telling us to roll up our sleeves and get to work. It's a passage that has a lot to say about *doing*. Last week's passage was also about *doing*. And that means that before we start talking about *doing*, we need to talk about *being*. Talking about doing without first talking about being—without first talking about Christ and who we are in him—puts the cart before the horse and can get us into all sorts of trouble. This is just what Paul's done, but because we've moved fairly slowly through his letter and have had some breaks, we might have forgotten the ground he's covered already. So, in verse 1 Paul introduced what he's now saying with that important, but often-missed word "therefore". What he's telling us to *do* here doesn't stand on its own; it follows from all the things he's been telling us in the first eleven chapters of the letter. He summed it up very briefly when he said that he was appealing to them by the *mercies of God*. Paul points back to the good news about Jesus. God sent him to die as a sacrifice for the sins of his people. God raised him from the dead. In Jesus' resurrection, God's new creation burst into the world and now he's called us to faith in Jesus' gracious work of redemption. Paul also spent quite a bit of time stressing that this is all of grace. As human beings, we are rebellious, sinful, idolaters. We rejected God. We rejected the holy vocation he gave us in the beginning. We've stolen the glory that belongs by right to him and

tried to claim it for ourselves. We've stolen the worship that rightly belongs only to him and we've showered it on everything but him. He gave us life and we submitted ourselves to death. But God has revealed his love by showering us with his grace, by giving his Son to die so that men and women can be forgiven and restored and take part in his new creation. This is love. This is grace. This is mercy. This is totally underserved. And our natural response—especially considering that part of this redemption has been the gift of God's own Spirit to indwell us and to transform us—our natural response should be that we offer our whole selves back to God. Paul called it being a living sacrifice and he said that when we do this, when our lives reveal the redeeming and transforming work of Jesus and the Spirit, it is a pleasing thing to God.

Again, we offer ourselves as living sacrifices out of gratitude for what God has done for us and because it's what Jesus makes of us. It's who are in him. We *do* this, because of who we *are* in Jesus. If we try to do this for any other reason, if we do it because we think we can merit something, if we do it because we think we can obligate God to respond, what we do is no longer by or in response to the mercies of God. Brothers and Sisters, the mercies of God are the basis and only basis for the Christian life.

So Paul began with this image of Jesus' people offering themselves as living sacrifices. The first thing he said is that this means not being conformed to the world—not being conformed to the old age that is passing away—but being conformed, instead, to the age to come, to the way of God's new creation. It begins with our minds, renewed by the Spirit and fed by the Scriptures, so that we can discern and work out what it means to be God's new creation. It begins with our minds and works out in practical ways to what we do: with our hands and feet, with our eyes and mouths. The knowledge of God's faithfulness

and goodness revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus reorients our hearts and turns our desires towards God and his kingdom.

But, thinking specifically, what does that Spirit-renewed and Scripture-fed thinking look like? The first thing that Paul says, in verse 3, is this:

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Have the mind of Jesus, Paul wrote to the Philippians. It should come naturally to us as Christians, but that doesn't mean it comes or is fully developed right away and without cultivation. It doesn't mean we get everything right. This is why as Jesus' people we *need each other*. You aren't going to get everything right and I'm not going to get everything right—not all on our own. Our whole generation of Christians isn't even going to get everything right. We need to listen to each other and to those who have walked with Jesus before us. We all get some things right and we all get some things wrong. There are things you might think through that it's never even occurred to me to think about at all. Others may be more thoroughly steeped in the Scripture than you. That's okay. You'll get there someday if you steep yourself in Scripture too, but in the meantime, we need to listen to what they may have to say.

Even more specifically, Paul highlights that sometimes our listening is part of what it means to be the church and to recognize what God is doing in and through our brothers and sisters. Paul appeals to them in this case saying that it is by the grace of God he has something to say. You're probably familiar with the Greek word for grace even if you don't know it. It's *charis*. It's the same word from

which we get *charismatic*. God gives us all gifts of his grace—we'll talk more about that in a bit—and one of Paul's gifts was that, as an apostle, God could speak through him authoritatively. This isn't just Paul saying what he thinks at this point. This is what God had told him to say. How exactly that worked isn't clear. The situation was unique to Paul and the other apostles. No Christians can stand up today and claim the same gift—and if they do, you should run away as fast as you can! But this was one of Paul's gifts of grace and he appeals to them to listen to what he has to say for just that reason.

And what he has to say is that in the Church no one should be thinking he or she is better than anyone else—not even Paul the Apostle. Don't think of yourselves more highly than you ought. This is true on a lot of levels. It's easy for Christians to forget that we are sinners saved by grace and to start thinking that God owes us something. It's easy for Christians to become proud of our accomplishments and to forget that all of it is by grace. In Paul's day there were Jewish believers who thought they were better Christians because they were descended from Abraham. And there were Gentiles who thought they were better Christians because they weren't part of the people condemned over and over by prophets and who rejected Jesus. But here Paul is specifically thinking of the way we live together as the Church. We're all different people with different backgrounds, personalities, differing abilities, and different gifts of grace. None of these things is the standard by which we should judge ourselves.

The standard that Paul sets out for us is “the measure of faith” that God has given to each of us. Now, what does that mean? Some have taken it to mean that God gives some people big faith and other people small faith, but if that's what Paul is saying, it undermines his main point. His main

point is that there is a measure or standard of faith by which every Christian should judge or evaluate him- or herself. Throughout Romans so far, Paul has made it clear that faith is the same for everybody and that this faith is the belief that Jesus is Lord, that he was crucified, and that God raised him from the dead. This is the faith we believe. This is the “mercies of God” that Paul appealed to as the basis and inspiration for everything we do—and it is the same for everyone. He's already said something very similar in the Chapter 11. That was the last time he mentioned faith, in fact. What he said there was that some branches were pruned off the tree because of unbelief and—speaking to Gentile believers—he said that they are only part of the tree because of faith and that the natural branches can just as easily be grafted back in. Paul's point there was for Gentile believers not to think more highly of themselves than they ought. So Paul's point isn't that God had given more faith to some and less to others, but that faith in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus is the standard—and only standard—to live by. You have this faith or you don't have this faith. That's it.

So that measure of faith highlights two things for us. First, we all stand before God on the ground of grace. Regardless of the status we may have in the present age, in the age to come, in the new creation of which the Church is the witness in the world, everyone stands before God as equals in Jesus the Messiah. In the Roman church there were Jews and Gentiles, there were men and women, there were freemen and slaves, there were rich and poor. Think of Onesimus and Philemon. Philemon was rich and important. Onesimus was a slave. They didn't stop being who they were, but were brothers in the faith and they stood on the same footing of grace in Christ. Brothers and Sisters, that's the sort of thing that should characterise the Church. Nothing else in the world

brings together different people and overcomes the divisions of the world like as Jesus does. That gets at the second point here: that we have our being in Jesus means that our being is shared with each other. This is what Paul gets at in verses 4 and 5:

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

Paul uses this same image of Jesus' people as his body in 1 Corinthians 12 as well. Here's what he means: The Messiah was to be Israel's representative. Jesus' resurrection is the proof of his Messiahship. He is the representative of his people. He died for them. And he rose for them. But what Paul's been explaining all along is that in the process, Jesus has reconstituted Israel. He's redefined what it means to be part of the covenant people of God. It's faith in Jesus. One of Paul's favourite ways to describe Christians is to say that we are “in Christ” or “in the Messiah” and this is what he emphasizes with this image of being part of one body. But it's deeper than that. When Paul wrote about his fellow Jews and about Jesus' solidarity with them, he talked about “flesh”. But here he uses a different word. Now Jesus' people are united with him by faith in a “body”. It's a similar idea, but Paul makes this switch from “flesh” to “body” to highlight the nature of the Church as the new Israel. For Paul, the “flesh” is corruptible, but the “body” is what is resurrected to the life of God and the age to come. For Paul, to talk about the Church as being “one body in the Messiah” is to point to the Church as the resurrected version of “Israel according to the flesh”.¹ The Church is now, in Jesus and the Spirit, what Israel was called to be. Not only that. The Church is now, in the Spirit and

¹ See Tom Wright, *Romans*, p. 710.

united with the risen Jesus, the present manifestation of God's new creation. We are the firstfruits of the resurrection, of God's work to make all things new and to set all things to rights. Talk about rolling our sleeves up and getting to work! This is what we are in Christ, but so often we just don't measure up. We are a new creation, but that work isn't complete—and yet we're still called to this task. Paul knew that, he knew the struggle, and that's why he's writing this. How do we do it?

Well, the first thing he highlights is that we're not—and should never be—on our own. There's no such thing as a loner Christian. We are the body of Jesus. Even hearing Paul talk about the Church as a body with many members, though, I think we're prone to missing the depth of what he's saying. Our society revolves so much around the idea of the individual that when we think of being a "member", we think of it first from the standpoint of being an individual. We think of a club or organization—or the Church—as just a bunch of individuals. But Paul flips it around. The Church is first a body. Think about your own body. Do you think of it as a bunch of individual parts? Probably not. First, you think about your body as a whole, then you recognize that it has parts. Often we don't even think about those individual parts unless something goes wrong with one of them. And that's how Paul describes the body of Jesus. We're not individuals who joined together as a body. No, first and foremost, we need to think of it in terms of Jesus having a body and we're the parts of it.

Paul goes on and says that, just like a human body, the body of Jesus has parts that serve different functions. Look at verses 6-8:

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving;

the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Here's that part where Paul tells us to roll up our sleeves. In writing to the Romans, he's being faithful to Jesus' calling to be the part of the body that he is and they need to be faithful, each one of them, doing and being whichever part of the body they are.

If you look at Paul's different letters, he writes about this in more than one place and in each place he describes different gifts or different parts of the body. Occasionally he duplicates some in different places and some parts or gifts are only mentioned in one place. Some people have tried to reduce the gifts of the Spirit down to one list compiled from the different places where Paul talks about these things, but that's much, much too narrow a way to approach it. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians he listed many supernatural gifts—things like prophecy, tongues, healing, miracles—and he did that, because he knew exactly what was going on in Corinth and knew that the problem was a certain group of people who called themselves or thought of themselves as the "spiritual" people. Paul literally addresses them as "spirituals". They were obsessed with miraculous gifts to the point of looking down on the people who didn't have those gifts as somehow lacking the Spirit. It's a parallel—seemingly an exact parallel—with the modern Pentecostal movement that teaches that the gift of tongues is *the* evidence of one having the gift of the Spirit. Paul wrote to the Corinthians and addressed the gifts that were being misused or misunderstood there. Paul, however, didn't have this sort of first-hand knowledge of the Romans and their problems weren't the problems of the Corinthians. Paul writes to

them in broader terms. The point is the same, however: First, these are gifts of grace that come from being part of the body. A brain has no business lording over a fingernail just because it's a brain. The brain isn't the brain because it earned it. It's just the part of the body he is. And just so with the body of Jesus. It's made up of different parts, we're all here by grace and grace alone, and Jesus has a purpose for us all. Paul also stresses that we're all mutually supportive of the body and of each other.

Now, that means that we've all got work to do. We have gifts—not just some of us, but all of us—so we need to get to work using them. It's really that simple. Maybe we need to figure out what our place in the body is first, but Brothers and Sisters, that's usually not that difficult to figure out. The problems people have in figuring out their gifts usually arise from the churches trying to force everyone to pick a single gift from a list or from the assumption that all the gifts are for use within the walls of the church building or from the thinking that every spiritual gift has to be something amazing and obviously supernatural. Friends, our gifts are more organic than that. They may involve something with a miraculous element like the ones Paul lists for the Corinthians, but in most cases they simply involve our natural and *God-given* temperaments and abilities coupled with the renewing and inspiring work of the Holy Spirit. What are you good at? Where is your passion? What has God put before you to do? That's your place in the body and, Paul says, do it. The prophet—one who applies the word of God to the people and situations around him with godly wisdom—he needs to get busy doing that and he needs to do it in a way that measures up to and that squares with the faith summed up in the gospel proclamation about the Lord Jesus. The server is to get busy serving. The teacher teaching. The exhorter exhorting.

What God has given you the skill, passion, and place to do, just do it. And do it knowing that whatever it is, no matter how seemingly great or small, the body is better off for your having done it. Do it knowing that if you're not doing it or if you absent yourself from the body, the rest of the body won't be operating or working as it should. And, again, remember what the body — what *we* are: The body is the present manifestation of Jesus and God's new creation in the present age. Our proclamation of the good news and our life in Jesus and the Spirit lift the veil on God's new creation and calls men and women to repentance and faith. And it takes all of us, working together, to accomplish that. If we're not being very successful in that calling, we need to ask ourselves if we're truly living as the body with every member doing his or her part.

Paul amplifies his point with the last three gifts listed. He says that if your gift and calling is to give, give *generously*. If you're a leader, lead with *zeal*. If your calling is to show mercy, do it *cheerfully*. The same goes for every gift. Paul starts out saying, "just do it" and now he says, "and do it with as much joy and gusto as you can". If you love something, you'll do it, you'll do it well, and you'll do it with joy. If we're not, we need to come back to again to the mercies of God. If we're lacking a passion for Jesus and his Church and if we're lacking a passion for doing the work he's called us to do, we need to come back to the cross. We need return to the cross and remember the love of God graciously poured out for sinners. We need to remember that we who were dead in our sins have been made alive by Jesus. Out of love for us, he gave himself as a sacrifice for sin. And, Brothers and Sisters, the more we meditate on the love of Jesus that we see in the cross, the more we meditate on the grace that he has shown to us, his enemies, the more love and gratitude should well up in our hearts. The more we grasp the

depth of Jesus' sacrifice for us, the more we will desire to give ourselves to him as living sacrifices. Dear Friends, God is pleased to see the body of Christ being the body of Christ. This is what he's saved us for—to be his people in the world as we lift the veil on his kingdom and give the people around us a glimpse of his faithfulness, goodness, and love.

Let pray: O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen*.