

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (9-4-1978 Strandtown Baptist Church)

Romans 12 v 3-8

Introduction

Last week commenced the practical section of the letter to the Romans. In light of God's Salvation, we have to live and behave in a certain way. Foundation is laid when there is consecration of the body and progressive renewal of the mind. This leads us to appreciation of God's will for our lives.

Now Paul moves from general to particular. Deals with Christian service, daily work, fellow Christians, neighbours, state and so on. Right relations to God leads to right relations to fellows. From spiritual emerges social.

In vv3-8 Paul discusses our place in the body of Christ, our gifts, and the way in which they are to be used.

Our place in the body of Christ

The Christian has faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord, and becomes part of Christ's body. The church is a spiritual organism, not a human organization. Each believer has a place and a part to fulfil. All belong to one another. All have part to play in body of Christ. All are meant to build one another up. All are necessary if Body is to function properly and effectively. One branch does not make a tree, one flower does not make a garden, one wave does not make a tide, one grain does not make a harvest, one instrument does not make an orchestra, one limb does not make a body, one member does not make a church. All are necessary and all have a place in the Church.

In order to play our part, each has been given different gifts. These are from God, not our attainment. They are often natural gifts and abilities and capacities, strengthened by the Holy Spirit. Reach a new peak of effectiveness because under the control of the Holy Spirit. Therefore we must be yielded to the indwelling Spirit. Diversity of gifts is according to grace, grace that is within.

All Christians have gifts. When all cooperate under the head, the body is in healthy condition. No one has all the gifts, but each one has some. All gifts are necessary if whole body to function properly. **Think soberly** about these things – weigh the matter up in a sensible way, as God has given us faith to do so (v3). J.B.Philips translates this as "Have a sane estimate of your capabilities by light of faith that God has given to you all."

Two dangers here, the first of which gets special emphasis: not to think of selves more highly than we ought to think. Do not have exaggerated idea of own importance. We do not have all the gifts, and, in any case, what we have, have been given to us. Be aware of limitations, and work accordingly. Recognize our province, and stay there.

The other danger – not only self admiration, but self-depreciation. We do not have all the gifts – but we do have some. Do not pretend we have nothing. Do not hide talents in ignorance or false humility. To Paul, a Christian without Christ-given gifts is a

monstrosity. Must not act as though God has given us nothing. If a Christian man is fit for no Christian work, he must ask himself if he has any Christian life. Easy to be bone idle because unable to see or unwilling to recognise gift, and therefore not do a thing, and hide behind false humility and a lie.

We are called to know ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, our capabilities and limitations. Observe self. Make honest assessment without conceit or false modesty. Accept self as we are. Often means doing the humble and unseen task. Do not try to be someone else. Do not envy someone else. Appreciate others. Not complain or be envious. Be ourselves as God has made us in our natural faculties, as transformed by new life in Christ. Recognise that all are different, all are necessary, all have a part to play. Jealousy, concern over who is more important than another, criticism which is unjust and unnecessary, are entirely out of place.

All have a job to do. Only we can do properly the job which is ours. Only when we do our job will the Body of Christ function as it should. Bounden duty to make own contribution to the common good. Not “How can I shine?”, but “How can I serve?” Not to further own ends or our own personal prestige. Each is only a part of the great whole. Unless our opinion of selves agrees with God’s, the result is inevitable failure.

Three great words – Unity, Diversity and Harmony. When all three are blended, the church can live its true life and do its proper work. “A place for everyone, and everyone in their place” is the key here. It matters not what special form of Christian service may be ours. The smallest and greatest are all alike to the Lord. Whether we are a cup-bearer or a counsellor is of little moment to God. The main thing is faithfulness in the sphere to which we are called. The Church would be really effective if these things were remembered. There would be no more “schisms rent asunder and heresies distressed”.

Learn to be true to ourselves, acknowledging rich variety and diversity in work of Spirit. Alexander McLaren said “Dreary monotony and uniformity amongst us which impoverishes us ... we all tend to look with suspicion at the man who is himself and who is true to his convictions and gifts... there would be a new life in all our Christian circles if we allowed full scope to diversities of operation and realized that in all there is one Spirit”

The Exercise of our Gifts

Where there are different functions, there will be one Spirit pervading the whole and filling the whole. Then seven gifts are mentioned. Not an exhaustive list, for there are other gifts, as we know from other Scriptures. Four are official, concerning public ministry, with special reference to the Church. Three are private, for general use, with special reference to the world.

1. Prophecy – the inspired declaration of God’s will. Not necessarily prediction. Included proclaiming Gospel. Utterance under immediate Divine guidance. According to proportion of our faith within limits of his trust in God. Speak according to convictions. Fully faithful to all God has revealed. Carlyle’s father said “What this parish needs is a man who knows Christ other than at second hand.”

2. Ministry. Just practical service. “Minister” in A.V. is normally servant. Ministry is practical Christian service. Notice how high on the list this comes. Nothing to do with public preaching of the Word, but showing love of Christ in deeds of lowly service. We should concentrate on this, really be in it. Practical service in church and to others includes wide variety of work. Grace fits us for lowliest as for the most exalted work in the church. To understand any form of service requires spiritual character. Original seven in Acts Ch. 6 were men full of faith and the Holy Spirit, though all they had to do was to hand their pittance to poor widows (Acts 6:3).
3. Teaching. Give all we have to our teaching. Message of Christ is not only to be proclaimed, but to be explained. Exhortation and invitation, without being backed up by teaching, are empty things. Explaining, expounding and applying are crucial.
4. Exhorting. Whereas teacher appeals mainly to the mind, the exhorter addressed himself to the will and emotions. He seeks to console, encourage, stimulate and rebuke. The work of the evangelist.
5. Giving, the first the three gifts mentioned for more private purposes. Giving is to be done with simplicity. Sheer pleasure of giving for giving’s sake. In generous, warm way. Not out of vanity or duty. Not flinging a gift from a height, like a bone to a dog. Done without show or self-interest, otherwise we add poison into the gifts, and this makes them bitter to the receiver. To give as God gives.
6. Ruling with diligence. Reference to someone who takes the lead or occupies a prominent place and position. One of the most difficult jobs in so many churches is to get people to take the lead and assume responsibility. Increasingly fewer are willing to give up leisure and pleasure to undertake leadership. Unfitness and unworthiness are often a smokescreen for laziness and self-interest. To be taken up with zeal. Need leaders who are enthusiasts.
7. Showing mercy with cheerfulness. Truest sympathy brings bright face into darkness and comes like sunshine into shady place. “Sunbeam penetrating a sick chamber” Cheerfulness and brightness in our service. “Joy of the Lord” to be evident. Vicar advertising for curate in a religious journal, looking for someone to be “pious but cheerful”! Little girl said of certain clergyman – “He must be an excellent man – he looks so sad.”

Conclusion

Oneness in Christ’s body means we all have a part to play. Paul mentions a few of the gifts which are amongst us. All of us have at least one of these gifts. Must yield bodies to God, as Christ yields Himself to us. What peace, energy and dignity comes into a life when we are consciously and deliberately surrendered. This delivers us from over-anxiety and ruinous self-importance. Quiet greatness born of presence and will of God.

*“Move and actuate and guide
Diverse gifts to each divide
Placed according to thy will
Let us all our work fulfil.
Never from our office move
Needful to each other prove,
Use the grace on each bestowed
Tempered by the art of God”
Charles Wesley*