

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part forty-three
Sunday, October 20th, 2019 - 5:30 p.m. - Teaching #2166
Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

GOD'S GIFT DISTRIBUTION PROGRAM

Romans 12:6-8 - "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; [7] if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; [8] 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."

We took a few weeks to get to the point of specifically examining some of these gifts in detail. That's because gifts - *any* gifts - are only *safe* and only *fruitful* in the body of Christ when they are used in the context Paul sets up of *humility* and *mutual interdependence*. Gifts are self-destructive in the hands of Christians who "*think of themselves more highly than they ought to think*"(12:3). More than a few churches have been fractured into splinters over people who *compete* for a spiritual voice because of their gifting, forgetting that gifts aren't *owned* by the gifted and that they aren't a sign of spiritual supremacy.

For all of those reasons Paul sets his explanation of the gifts in the context of the local church. They flourish where people *know* each other and *love* each other. Jesus is the only Lord over the gifts. The gifts are all geared to enhance unity and ministry. Paul makes it clear the gifts enable the body gathered *together* to accomplish more than any member can *alone*.

This is important because there are some teachers in the church who can do nothing but wail and moan about the *risks* and *dangers* arising from the *abuse* of spiritual gifts, they miss Paul's overall intention to magnify God's plan of *blessing* in their Scriptural use. All of this is laid down in Paul's foundational remarks about the gifts in the body of Christ.

But what do these gifts look like? Paul doesn't tell us all that much. The list he gives in Romans chapter 12 is incredibly brief and sketchy. It is never meant to be an *inclusive* list of gifts. But what he includes is important and we'll examine some of the details tonight. Paul lists gifts of *prophecy, serving, teaching, exhorting, contributing, and mercy*.

1) **THE GIFT OF PROPHECY**

Romans 12:6 - "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith...."

First, what does Paul mean by that word *prophecy*? Depending on your denominational background and the theological grid through which you process these texts there are a number of opinions. In the line of Calvin and Luther prophecy is nothing more than the preaching of the Word in the early church. Because preaching - especially in Paul's day - would be based almost exclusively on the Old Testament, and because the Old Testament was written by God appointed prophets, preaching is a *prophetic* event.

But there are many, even in the classical Reformed tradition who see something more than this in Paul's reference to the gift of prophecy in Romans chapter 12. I was surprised (and very pleased) to see this in the expositions of Romans by *Martyn Lloyd-Jones*. Here's what he says in his teaching on Romans 12:

"Let me tell you what prophecy does not mean. It does not merely mean that a man has a gift of expounding the Old Testament prophecies. There have been many people who have taught that. They say, 'Prophecy means the gift and capacity to expound the writings of the prophets....'"

"What, then, is the gift of prophecy? Well, I would define it as a direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What for? Its purpose is to give a word from God, or the word of God, to the church....That is the content of prophecy. It has been defined like this - and I feel it is a rather good definition - prophecy is 'the inspired delivery of warning, exhortation, instruction, and making manifest the secrets of the heart.' Someone who makes a prophecy has been given this gift of passing on, as it were, a word from God to the church...."

This makes good sense to me. I think it fits with the New Testament *context* about the gift of prophecy in the church. It fits with the more extensive teaching Paul gives on the same gift in **1 Corinthians 14**. The gift of prophecy (also sometimes called a "*word*" of prophecy in the New Testament) is something *brief* (a *word*, not a lecture), it is *immediate* (given for that local group, in their specific situation, not *universal*), and it is *given* (not *prepared* like a sermon or teaching).

All of these are what make **prophecy** different from the gift of **teaching**, which Paul will mention in just a moment. The gift of **teaching** centers on the exposition and explanation of God's timeless revelation in the Scriptures. The teacher works with the content already **given**. The truth the teacher expounds is for **all** Christians at **all** times in **all** places.

This is what makes the gift of teaching the **normative** or **controlling** revelation for the church. **Prophecies** aren't the final revelation. Paul says prophecies are to be **sifted** and **discerned** by the rest of the church body (**1 Corinthians 14:29**). Well, how are they to be **measured**? By what **standard**? They're to be measured by the systematic teaching of God's Word.

That's why, when Paul comes to delineate the gifts required by pastors in the local church he says they must all be **teachers** - **1 Timothy 3:1-2** - "**The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. [2] Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach....**" They don't have to be **prophets**. They must be teachers who equip the body to measure all prophets - true and false.

But the emphasis of Paul in Romans 12 is on the **usefulness** of prophecy in the church. This is one of the reasons **why** God fits people into the church to accomplish the renewal of their minds. God can speak into our lives through others in His body. True enough, these prophecies aren't **infallible**. They must be **measured and assessed**. But they are very useful.

And here's another important point. Prophecies don't just **happen**. People must, to use Paul's words, "**....prophecy in proportion to our faith**"(**12:6**). That means people don't always prophecy **easily**. People must **exercise** the prophetic gift. God doesn't prophecy **for** us. People must pray and think and present themselves as available. In other words, it takes a measure of **faith** to prophecy.

And here's something else. When Paul says we must prophecy "**in proportion to our faith,**" he means our prophecy must be **in accordance** with the truth of the faith. It mustn't be **scattered** or **careless**. It mustn't be **contrary** to what the Bible teaches and it must not be **contrary** to what will **produce** faith in the hearers.

So yes, there are boundaries to prophecy. And yes, there are **risks**. Yet Paul still says, "**take the risks.**" Bring a Biblical understanding to the subject. If the body is both humble and discerning - by that I mean the one **giving** the prophecy is **humble** and the ones **hearing** the prophecy are **discerning** - then the church will be edified.

2) THE GIFT OF SERVING

Romans 12:6a and 7a - "**Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them....[7] if service, in our serving....**"

I think it is intentional that Paul places this gift of "**servicing**" right between **prophecying** and **teaching**. Most of us admit the divine gifting that carries **prophecy** and **teaching**. They are such visible gifts when they are exercised. They get recognition and attention. Sometimes they even get admiration and appreciation. But **servicing**? We think of cleaning toys in the nursery or delivering food baskets or picking up paper in the sanctuary. What is **divine** about serving?

Paul says this is a huge mistake. God equips people to serve. They are not **less** gifted than the prophet or the teacher. They are not less essential. Their **role** is different. But not their **importance**. Each one must find his or her **place** in the body.

We have a wonderful example of this gift of service in the book of Acts: **Acts 6:1-7** - "**Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. [2] And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. [3] Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. [4] But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."**

[5] "And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. [6] These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. [7] And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem,

and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”

Notice that list of names in **verse 5**. We know a bit about **Philip** and **Stephen**. But who in the world are **Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus**? And yet look what happened in **verse 7** - “**And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.**”

Why did the word of God increase in such dramatic fruitfulness right at that point? It was because of the faithful service of these people. They enabled the ministry of the word to be extended through the apostles by their faithful ministry of service. So, in the end, you can't quite tell who would get the credit for the revival - the apostles or the servants. And that's exactly the way it **should** be in the local church.

3) **THE GIFT OF TEACHING**

Romans 12:6a and 7b - “**Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them....[7]....the one who teaches, in his teaching....”**

I like the way Paul reminds us that these gifts are **different** from each other. And I think that begins to manifest itself as we work through Paul's short list of examples. **Teaching** is different from **prophecy**. We saw that earlier in this teaching. It becomes quite obvious if you study some of the examples of the use of the gift of prophecy in the New Testament:

1 Corinthians 14:29-30 - “**Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. [30] If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent.**”

We've already looked at this passage in previous teachings, so we're not studying it in detail here. My only point is to note the way a revelation just **comes** to this second person. He hasn't been studying texts and books and commentaries. He is simply “**sitting there.**” That's really amazing, and it captures the essence of the nature of the gift of prophecy.

But teaching isn't like that at all. There is nothing about it that comes across as **effortless** or **spontaneous**. This is why the apostles had to appoint those who would **serve** the widows and the needy in **Acts chapter 6**. Teaching takes **time**. True, it is a spiritual **gift**, but it isn't as easily unwrapped or as immediate as **prophecy**. And you can quickly see this being emphasized in the Scriptures:

2 Timothy 2:15 - “**Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.**”

2 Timothy 2:2 - “**....and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.**”

So to rightly handle the word of truth you must be a “**worker.**” This is never said about the gift of prophecy. It's never said about another gift Paul will mention next - **exhortation**. Teaching takes work on two different fronts. It takes work to **study and learn the Word**. And it takes a lot of effort and work to **communicate** that truth so people can learn it and pass it on to others.

This is why the gift of **teaching** is very different from **scholarship**. The scholar must learn and know and understand. But the teacher must do all of that, but with a particular **goal** in view. He must then **communicate** that truth to people who **aren't** scholars. He must help them **use** the content of his teaching to grow up into Christ Jesus in holiness and discipleship.

4) **THE GIFT OF EXHORTATION**

Romans 12:6a and 8a - “**Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them....[8] the one who exhorts, in his exhortation....”**

People need more than their **minds** enlightened. They **do** need that, but they have other needs as well. People need their **hearts** lifted. They need encouragement. They need someone to **lift** their sights and their faith. They need **exhortation**.

Here we see the beauty of the body of Christ. We are members **one of another**, says Paul. We are linked up that

way so as to, not just **know** about our **own** pain, but also that of the **other** members in the church. That's what Paul means when he says we're to "**Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep**"(12:15).

In fact, this is where we can learn the answer to a question that frequently plagues Christians. Why do we suffer so much senseless pain and loss as we follow Jesus? And the answer to that question has a great deal to do with the development of **encouragers** and **exhorters** in the church: **2 Corinthians 1:3-5** - "**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, [4] who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. [5] For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.**"

Look for those who need **lifting up**. There are more opportunities to flex the gift of exhortation every week in this church than you can imagine. And well look at the next three gifts next week.