

Assessing a Christian's Life & Gifts—Romans 12:1-8—6/25/2023

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As most of you know, this summer I'm taking some Sunday sermons to answer questions that you sent me over the spring semester.

I've answered questions on God's immutability & sovereignty & we've addressed a bit about marriage & children.

We've ranged from mind-blowing theological to day-to-day practical.

Today we come to another set of practical questions about how to know whether we might be shrinking from our responsibilities or overcommitting beyond our responsibilities.

As part of our church philosophy, we strive for ministry rotations that give breaks every other month or semester for you all as you serve.

To keep that going, we all need to be ready to serve yet also not be serving so much that you rarely take time to enjoy worship & fellowship & feeding on God's Word regularly.

We cannot afford for anyone to be too busy with other things to serve or to view ministry needs as someone else's responsibility.

So I'm thankful so many of you gladly & sacrificially serve.

But that leads to another question—should you volunteer for every need possible even if it means neglecting other things?

How should you as a Christian be assessing your life & gifts?

That is a question best answered in conversation on a case-by-case basis & so the added question on this topic asked for ways to evaluate our hearts in such scenarios.

Many passages can be helpful in considering the call to serve in the church or in prioritizing our responsibilities.

But I tried to choose just one & so let's turn to Romans 12:1-8 to recall some categories for assessing the way you view your life & gifts.

Look at Romans 12:1-8 & let's read that to begin. [READ]

I did 16 sermons on these verses in 2011-2012 when I was preaching through Romans & so you can refer to those messages on our app or website to dig into the details of these verses more thoroughly.

We dug into questions of God's will & decision making & the ceasing of sign gifts & more than come up in this section.

But for today, I'm just hitting some highlights to help us think about why we exist & what the Gospel calls us to & how we live that out.

And it all starts with our motivation in verse 1 that is so vital with a 1st point that we can phrase like this—#1—rest in God's mercies & surrender all to God's glory.

Point #1—rest in God's mercies & surrender all to God's glory.

If you are evaluating whether to commit to the church or whether to serve in the church or how much to serve, you need to make sure you start with the right motivation.

Do not commit to anything without first committing to Christ.

And committing to Christ involves finding rest in God's mercies that freely come to those who trust Christ.

It's crucial to note how Romans 12:1 begins this section of exhortations & so read those first 10 words of verse 1 again. [READ]

Paul was not urging them by the merits of their behavior or by the means of their efforts or by the methods of their religion.

He was urging them by the mercies of God.

And he was speaking to brethren, to brothers & sisters in God's spiritual family who had received those mercies in Christ.

The word 'therefore' connects all that comes after this to all that came before it as the first 11 chapters of Romans set a massive theological foundation in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

To rightly approach following Christ in all of life, we must cherish all that Romans 1-11 says God has already done for us.

We must obey, not to make something true of us, but because of what is already true by God's grace received in Christ.

As we say, we must ground the imperatives in the indicative.

In other words, we must root the commands of what to do in the statements of what has been done & what is already true.

Before we can rightly respond to what God tells us to do, we must rightly rest in what God already has done.

And I have to tell you—getting this wrong will continually discourage you & may eternally condemn you.

But in contrast, getting this right will awaken you to true life with God & transform your approach to all you do.

How you approach God & obedience reveals so much about whether you get the Gospel & make sense of the Christian life.

Romans chapters 1-3 explained the sinfulness of each one of us & how we fail to measure up to God's standard & are without excuse & under condemnation for our sins if left to ourselves.

We are not good by God's standards & we cannot be good enough to gain acceptance with Him nor to atone for all the bad we have done.

But Romans 3:21 transitions in Paul's argument to extol what God has done that we could never do by providing Jesus Christ to be His perfect righteousness displayed in human life.

God grants that righteous record of Jesus' life as counting for every person who ever truly turns from sin to faith in Jesus.

And Romans 3:25-26 explain that Jesus died as a propitiation for sin for all who believe, meaning He satisfied God's wrath on sin by punishing Jesus instead of those who trust Jesus.

Jesus was the Lamb of God pictured in the OT sacrifices & He is also the Promised Savior & King who is God who came to earth as a man.

So as Romans 4 mentions, we can praise God like Abraham & David did in the OT when they were counted as righteous & forgiven for their sins by trusting in that Promised Savior.

Romans 4 ends with the reminder that Jesus rose from the dead to prove His promises secure for our rest in God's mercies.

That rest in God's mercies is what must motivate serving Him.

Listen & don't forget this—please do not approach any question of church involvement or life choices or morality apart from a settled security for your soul in the Person & work of Christ.

We must always return to that to check our motives & reframe our perspective lest we think we owe God to get Him to like us.

This fundamental heart-check also helps us to weed out selfish motives for our own glory like trying to be noticed by others.

That's ridiculous when everything we enjoy is a gift from God.

When we understand how lavishly gracious God is & how amazingly glorious His plan is, then surrender to Him is the reasonable choice.

Read the second half of verse 1 again to recall that. [READ]

This is language of sacrifice where an offering was laid on the altar & fully consumed in worship of God.

This is not partial surrender & yet it is a living sacrifice, one that lays on the altar & stays on the altar set apart to God.

This pleases God through the mediating work of Jesus our High Priest.

And the term *spiritual* points to what is reasonable, meaning it is thoughtful & rational, based on truth & responding to truth.

If we trust Christ, then we belong to God & we exist for His glory & so it only makes sense to surrender all to Him to use us for His glory.

That's not some mystical or emotional experience or a repeated walking an aisle for penance or rededication.

It's a lifestyle of evaluating everything by God's Word to act by faith in His commands & promises & seek to enjoy His wisdom.

That leads us to verse 2 & a 2nd basic way to assess ourselves as Christians striving to live Gospel-motivated lives of service.

1st, rest in God's mercies & surrender all to God's glory.

As we are motivated by God's mercies & gladly respond to His mercy, it is only fitting to live for His glory.

Then 2ndly, we must evaluate by God's Word & enjoy God's wisdom.

Point #2, evaluate by God's Word & enjoy God's wisdom.

Read verse 2 again where we see this emphasized. [READ]

We must be warned that we are naturally conformed to the world because that's what is pressing in on us all the time.

We live in this fallen world with its ideologies that are opposed to God & with deceptive twists that tempt us.

We must be on guard not to be conformed to this world & be laboring consistently to be transformed by renewing our minds.

That means truth is central—God's Word is the diagnostic tool to examine our practices & passions for what to put off & what to put on.

As we do so, we pursue proving that God's will really is good, pleasing & perfect like He promises it will be.

This gets into biblical decision making & rightly viewing God's will.

God's will here is not some hidden special message or voice or feeling you seek after as if He will tell you the future.

God's will is what He has revealed in His Word.

It's not mysterious or secret or mystically discovered.

It's as plain as His promises in the Gospel for how to be right with Him & walk with Him & what that looks like in every area of life.

And His Word is good—we put it into practice & prove it as we enjoy His blessings in relationships with Him & others.

That's a bit of what I mean from verse 2 in saying that we must evaluate everything by God's Word & enjoy God's wisdom.

For us to assess ourselves & make wise decisions for our ministry investments & life priorities, we must know the Scriptures & meditate on them & soak in theology & practice

So now let's pause & use these first 2 points to go back to the original question of how to assess your life & gifts & ministry involvements.

1st be sure you have the right motives even though we must not scrutinize to a level of analysis paralysis where we fail to act.

We return to the Gospel & rest in God's mercies & praise Him for His grace in Christ & freshly surrender all to Him to be used for His glory.

With that foundation, then we consider what to do next.

So next we consider what God has commanded & seek to build a structure of clarity in His ways that funnels us toward wise choices.

For example, if you are married, He has commands for wives & husbands & similarly He has commands for parents & for children & for other areas like honest, faithful work.

So if responding to some ministry opportunity will mean that you will regularly neglect or ignore clear responsibilities that God has commanded for other areas of life, then you should say "no".

It may be acceptable & even right to sacrifice to meet a need, but we must not disobey one command to try to obey another.

And that's a helpful way to answer questions about overcommitting to too much that may sound good but ends up being bad.

We must weigh all that God's Word has to say for all of life as we seek to be faithful & sometimes the best choices are not what gets us the most appreciation or recognition.

So don't forget biblical warnings against greed & coveting & pride.

As we prayerfully meditate on Scripture, decision making is a process of narrowing down to a level of purposeful freedom.

God does not contradict Himself in what He tells us to do.

As verse 2 says, we must saturate our minds with biblical truth to be transformed in Christ & not conformed to the world.

And we need to realize that we are not as important as we may think we are—we need to think with humility & act with faith as we serve.

Read verse 3 to see that & then we'll note a 3rd point. [READ]

A 3rd takeaway point for assessing our lives & gifts is this—#3, think with humility & act with faith.

Point #3—think with humility & act with faith.

To review, we've said #1, to rest in God's mercies & surrender all to God's glory, #2, to evaluate by God's Word & enjoy God's wisdom, & now #3, think with humility & act with faith.

We find that call to humility in verse 3 here with the caution *not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think.*

In other words, to state it positively as what to do rather than what not to do—do this—think with humility.

That does not mean to think that you have nothing to offer or you compare yourself with others & their gifts.

That's false humility connected with external appearances that often have more to do with our selfish insecurities than with reality.

Humility is not the same as self-pity that wallows in what you are not or what you wish to be.

Humility starts with the Gospel by confessing our need for Christ because we have nothing good to offer to get right with God.

But if we turn from self-trust to faith in Christ, we move into the 2nd part of verse 3 & need to think with sound judgment.

Thinking with sound judgment roots our identity not only in what Christ has done for us but also in what He has promised for us.

And one thing He promised for His followers is the indwelling presence & power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the 3rd Person of the Trinity, fully God, & He gives us faith in God's Word & the power to trust & obey & to enjoy the promises & blessings of Him bearing good fruit in & through us.

That does not mean we can do anything by some worldly error of the power of positive thinking or name-it-&-claim it error.

But having the Holy Spirit does mean we can step out in faith to act on what God's Word says for NT Christians & we can expect that He will do more than we can ask or think.

Ephesians 3:20 is a prayerful expectation for God to do that.

When we know God's promises & are presented with opportunities for ministry, we beg God for help & we step out in faith & try to serve.

We do not control outcomes & we are not guaranteed that our efforts will go well, but we know God is working for our good.

So at least we can try—we can step out with faith in the commands & promises of Scripture & strive to serve in whatever opportunity comes.

That's what I mean by saying 3rdly that we think with humility & act with faith—humility leads us to trust God & obey what He said with faith in His promises to help us.

For example, when we realize that we must act by faith in God's supply, we are free to give generously even when it's a sacrifice.

We are enabled to serve different people or those younger or older if we see a need & trust God to help us serve.

Of course, humility also reminds us that we are not God & no single one of us has all the gifts to meet every need.

It is right & wise & beautiful to recognize that others are more gifted in various areas & I need them & their gifts in my life.

So that may mean you pray for a need rather than volunteer to meet it.

Other responsibilities may constrain us at times to say “no” because our commitments already limit us somehow & that's part of humbly admitting that we cannot do everything.

And when I mention commitments, I mean biblical commitments & not hobbies or escapes or extra stuff.

I mean your role at home or your job or other church ministries or something God says in His Word to prioritize for your life.

We must always consider our sphere of responsibility and what's in it and what's outside it and evaluate it.

But if you are saying “no” & not serving because of worldly diversions or selfishness or laziness, then don't assume it's ok.

We must not have a blind eye or closed heart to the needs of others & the opportunities to bless others.

So think with humility & then act with faith.

And the beautiful design of God is that we pursue this in the church where we are loved & trained with those who can help & counsel us.

We grow in serving others as we learn how differently others are gifted & we see God's grace at work through them.

That leads to a 4th point of application to add this this self-assessment of life & gifts—#4, prioritize the church & value every member.

Know that you exist to serve Christ in the one entity He promised to build on earth & that is His church.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus promised success in His mission by saying, “*I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.*”

So point #4 is to prioritize the church & value every member.

To follow Christ, you must be committed to the local church & we read that emphasis as we read verses 4-5 again. [READ]

It’s helpful how these verses build into proper serving from the motive & mindset to the context or place.

By place I mean the relationships with fellow believers in the church & not a church building itself necessarily.

1st Corinthians 14 also uses this body analogy for the church.

When we are talking about spiritual gifts to serve, we are talking about gifts given by God’s grace, not merits or talents earned by people.

And those help us keep in mind that God is the One governing His church with the people & giftedness He puts together.

His plan from the beginning of the church in the book of Acts has always been that new believers are baptized & added to the church.

When Ephesians 3:20 refers to God doing more than we can ask or think, it’s referring to what He does in the church.

So to be in Christ is to be in a body with interdependent relationships.

And that’s not talking merely the universal church where all Christians all over the world are unified by faith in Christ.

We can experience that as we travel & gather with others, but the emphasis here & throughout the NT is on the local congregation.

The idea is that to be a Christian is to be a church member.

You must be in the earthly expression of His bride if you are married to Christ or you are missing the whole context of the NT message.

This body analogy is a call for committed church membership.

So if you are pondering whether to be committed to some regular ministry in the local church or only to be loosely connected & not a member or not serving, then the decision is easy.

If you truly know & love Christ, then you must love His bride.

You must prioritize the local church.

The NT has no category for floating around as solo Christians autonomously assuming God is leading.

Verses like these make no sense unless you prioritize your life’s schedule around the ministry & relationships of the local church.

And if you’ve been in the church long enough—or even if you haven’t—you have probably met some weird people.

Seriously—I guarantee that there are some people that you just do not get & they may not get you either.

Backgrounds may be as diverse as Jew & Gentile in NT times.

Or gifts may differ in ways that it’s obvious that they are wired to do things you are not & vice versa.

And you know what?—that’s ok as long as we are all committed to Christ & His Gospel & God’s Word.

With that same foundation & life by the same Spirit, we are individually members one of another in the same body.

So God can help us can figure out how to love one another.

We learn that 2nd part of point 4, to value every member of the church.

Verse 4 says all the members do not have the same function but verse 5 says we are members of one another in the same body.

You may struggle to figure out what the function of some people are because we all have our issues, but we need one another.

God planned to grow us in Christ by putting us together in relationships of mutual ministry.

We are not lone rangers who can get along without others.

We are not gifted enough to not need others, but we are gifted enough so that others do need us.

We won't really experience God's full design until we are serving in the local church in the ways God has gifted us.

You won't understand the Christian life fully until you know that you need to serve & you need others to serve you.

You might say it this way—we need a low enough view of ourselves to see our need for relationships and ministry from others.

And we need a high enough view of God's promises to trust that God has gifted us so that others need ministry from us.

Of course, your gifts in God's design may not fit exact NT categories because the categories are general and representative.

And you may not fit an exact slot with a clearly defined title for serving some church ministry, but if you are a Christian, then God has gifted you in a way that others need you.

So you need to trust Him and seek how you can be a blessing first of all merely by being faithfully committed and connected.

You can do so by praying for others & caring about others.

Often the informal and indefinable ministry moments are what truly shape us & grow us & even direct us in how best to use our gifts.

And that's why in assessing opportunities to serve, we need to guard against resisting needs or opportunities that will be with different members that we might otherwise like to avoid.

Of course, we may have desires or gifts toward certain things & it's not wrong to pursue those, but we always need to guard against isolating with those who are easier to minister with.

To assess the Christian life & our gifts rightly, we must prioritize the church & value every member.

1st, we rest in God's mercies & surrender all to God's glory.

2ndly we evaluate by God's Word & enjoy God's wisdom.

Then 3rdly, we think with humility & act with faith.

& 4thly, we prioritize the local church & value every member.

Then 5thly & lastly, we practice our gifts & never stop loving.

Point #5, practice your gifts & never stop loving.

Read Romans 12:6-8. [READ]

God graces us with gifts & our responsibility is to use them, to get to work in whatever needs & opportunities God shows us.

That is not an option & that is vital to grasp no matter what age or stage of life you are in—serving in the church is not an option.

I praise God for dear senior saints I've known through the years who reached the place where they were shut-ins who could not gather regularly with the church for health reasons.

But their limitations did not stop them from serving because they loved the church & so they grew into dependable prayer warriors.

You can pray or make phone calls or send texts or emails or cards or share conversations or smiles & just faithfully gather to sing & study & you need to know that all that does matter.

We are many members in one body,
many individual parts in one corporate whole,
many differences in one commonality,
many relatives in one shared relationship,
& many functions in one interdependent organism.

That is some of what it means to be in Christ in His body.

We are made to be in relationships & in mutual ministry together with one another.

We won't get into the various gifts listed here as they are only a sample of possible gifts as all the lists are.

You are mostly likely a unique blend of a variety of the gifts in the NT & most of those can grow & develop with practice.

So 5thly & finally today, practice your gifts & never stop loving.

That's a quick survey of Romans 12:1-8 to motivate us all in faithful involvement in the church as we follow Christ.

I pray it helps us to assess our priorities & commitments as ministry opportunities & responsibilities come & go through the seasons of life.

I pray this passage gives some categories to evaluate with.

I pray you are resting in God's mercies & surrendering all to God's glory & if you are not, then please talk to someone after the service & get help to anchor you in the Gospel to help you take that next step.

I pray you are evaluating everything by God's Word & enjoying God's wisdom so that you are not overwhelmed by wrong commitments or under-committed in right ways.

And I pray you are thinking humbly & acting in faith & prioritizing the church & valuing every member & we'd love to help you in those areas also if we can do so.

Now pray with me for these areas as we also close in praying that we will practice using our gifts & never stop loving.