

LESSON 2

Love and Gifts

For by the grace given to me, I tell everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he should think. Instead, think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one. Now as we have many parts in one body, and all the parts do not have the same function, in the same way we who are many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another. According to the grace given to us, we have different gifts: If prophecy, use it according to the proportion of one's faith; if service, use it in service; if teaching, in teaching; if exhorting, in exhortation; giving, with generosity; leading, with diligence; showing mercy, with cheerfulness.

— Romans 12:3-8

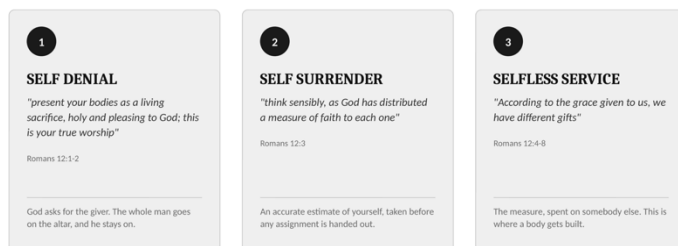
A congregation loves by taking a real measure of what God handed it and then spending that measure on somebody else.

Introduction

ROMANS 12 IS THE TURNING POINT IN THE EPISTLE. The eleven previous chapters focus on what God has done: sin, law, faith, the Spirit, the promise, and mercy reaching Jews and Gentiles alike. Then Paul turns to what a body of people does in response. Watch what Paul does first. Before he assigns a single task, he asks every member of the local church to take a measurement.

Three Movements

Romans 12:1-8 - each one makes the next one possible



Dedication comes first. Nothing downstream works without it.

Four sections here, and then a room in Jerusalem. Romans 12 opens with two verses in which mercy arrives before any command. Verse 3 uses one Greek root four times, and the repetition sets the terms for how a Christian measures himself. Verses 4 and 5 show many parts belonging to one another. Verses 6 through 8 name seven gifts and the way each is spent. Last comes an upper room, where the only man who ever

knew the full measure of what He had been given washed the feet of His disciples.

Romans 12:1-2 – Mercy Before Assignment

Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship, Romans 12:1.

That *therefore* is carrying eleven chapters. Everything Paul asks from here to the end of the letter rests on what God has already done, and he says so in the same breath: *in view of the mercies of God*. Then the offering. The last lesson ended at an altar, where Christ *gave himself for us as a sacrificial and fragrant offering*, Ephesians 5:2. Here in Romans 12, the entire congregation is at the same altar.

Do not be *conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God*, Romans 12:2.

There is that middle term again. Ephesians told a congregation *to be renewed in the spirit of your minds*, Ephesians 4:23, and placed the renewal between taking off the old self and putting on the new. Paul places it here between the offering and the assignment. Why the mind, and why right here? Because of what he asks next. A man cannot take an accurate reading of himself with a mind still shaped by the world he lives in.

There is a second reason, and most congregations have watched it play out. A Christian who has handed God only part of himself never finds out what he was given to do. He runs hot and cold, volunteers in a season of enthusiasm, goes quiet in a season of boredom, and concludes that nobody ever found a place for him. The trouble started back in verse 1.

Romans 12:3 – An Honest Measurement

For by the grace given to me, I tell everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he should think. Instead, think sensibly, as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one, Romans 12:3.

Paul measures himself first. *By the grace given to me*. Whatever authority stands behind this sentence was handed to him. Then the sentence itself. Paul builds it on one Greek root and uses that root four times in a single verse. A wooden rendering lets an English reader hear what the CSB smooths away: *do not think beyond what is necessary to think, but think with sober thinking*. Smooth that out, and you get *think sensibly*, which reads better and hides the hammering.⁷

One Root, Four Times

Romans 12:3 • a wordplay English cannot carry

hyperphronein to think above CSB: think of himself more highly	phronein to think CSB: than he should think	phronein to think CSB: Instead, think	sōphronein sound thinking CSB: sensibly
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A WOODEN RENDERING

Do not think beyond what is necessary to think, but that you think with sober thinking.

Smooth it out and you get think sensibly, which reads better and hides the hammering.

Sōphroneō is the word Mark uses when the legion is gone, and the townspeople find the man *sitting there, dressed and in his right mind*, Mark 5:15. That is what Paul asks of a church. A room full of people in their right minds about themselves.

Notice the shape of the correction. Paul is less concerned with how much we think about ourselves than with which

way that thinking runs. He asks for accuracy. The one who insists he has nothing to offer has failed the verse as surely as the member who believes the work could not go on without him. Both quit looking at what God handed out and started looking at each other.

That is the foundation: *as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one*. God does the dividing. The measure differs from member to member, and nobody in the room arranges his own. He measures it out to put each member where he is needed. Grace and measure both stood at the front of this study already: according to the measure of Christ's gift, Ephesians 4:7. Here they come back together. So why does an honest self-estimate come before any list of gifts? Because comparison ruins a body faster than anything else Paul will name, and he cuts it off before he names a single gift.

Romans 12:4-5 – Parts That Belong to One Another

Now as we have many parts in one body, and all the parts do not have the same function, in the same way we who are many are one body in Christ and individually members of one another, Romans 12:4-5.

Two facts, and then a conclusion worth slowing down for:

1. A body has many parts.
2. The parts do different things.

Nobody argues with this. Paul spends most of a chapter on it in Corinth, where a foot argued that it was not a hand and so did not belong to the body. It is no less a part of the body for that, 1 Corinthians 12:15. The sentence could have stopped at members of Christ, and every word would have been true. Paul kept going: *individually members of one another*. Belonging runs sideways as well as upward. The brother whose gift looks nothing like yours is a part of you, and a congregation is not a room of independent contractors sharing a building. There is relief in that. No one is asked to hold the structure up. Each one carries the part he was entrusted with.

Growth comes *by the proper working of each individual part*, Ephesians 4:16. Each part. Including the one nobody has ever thanked.

Romans 12:6-8 – Seven Gifts

According to the grace given to us, we have different gifts: If prophecy, use it according to the proportion of one's faith; if service, use it in service; if teaching, in teaching; if exhorting, in exhortation; giving, with generosity; leading, with diligence; showing mercy, with cheerfulness, Romans 12:6-8.

Here is grace again, the second time in four verses. *According to the grace given to us* is the phrase Paul used of himself in verse 3, with a single word changed: *given to me*, *given to us*. The word for *gifts* here is *charismata*, formed from *charis*.⁸ A gift in this passage is a piece of grace with a job attached to it.

Seven items in three verses, and the passage runs almost entirely on verbs. Paul never asks whether the Romans have gifts. He asks what they are doing with them. What God puts in a man's hands is meant to be exercised, not admired.

Notice how ordinary the list is. Prophecy stands at the front, and the list quickly settles into work done without a microphone: helping, encouraging, giving, leading, and sitting with someone who is suffering. Paul ranks none of them and marks none as optional.

One more thing sits in these verses. To four of the seven, Paul adds *how* it is to be done.

Seven Gifts

Romans 12:6-8 · four of them come with a word about how

Prophecy	"according to the proportion of one's faith"	analogia
Service	"use it in service"	
Teaching	"in teaching"	
Exhorting	"in exhortation"	
Giving	"with generosity"	haplotēs
Leading	"with diligence"	spoudē
Showing mercy	"with cheerfulness"	hilarotēs

How a thing is done belongs to what is done.

Prophecy goes *according to the proportion of one's faith*, which asks a man to stay inside what he was handed. Leading goes *with diligence*, *spoudē*, a word carrying haste and earnest effort. Giving goes *with generosity*, *haplotēs*, which means singleness before it means generosity, an undivided heart that gives without calculating the return. Paul uses it of the Macedonians, whose *extreme poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity*, 2 Corinthians 8:2.⁹

And mercy goes *with cheerfulness*. The Greek is *hilarotēs*, and Romans 12:8 is the only place the noun appears in the New Testament. Its adjective surfaces once too, at the end of the letter this quarter closes with: *God loves a cheerful giver*, 2 Corinthians 9:7.¹⁰

Stay with that. Mercy can be delivered in a way that fails the verse. A meal carried in with a sigh. Help offered while the helper keeps score. The gift was used, and the manner spoiled it. How a thing is done belongs to what is done.

Looking to Christ

Verse 3 asks us to know exactly what we have been given and to keep our heads about it. John shows us a man who did.

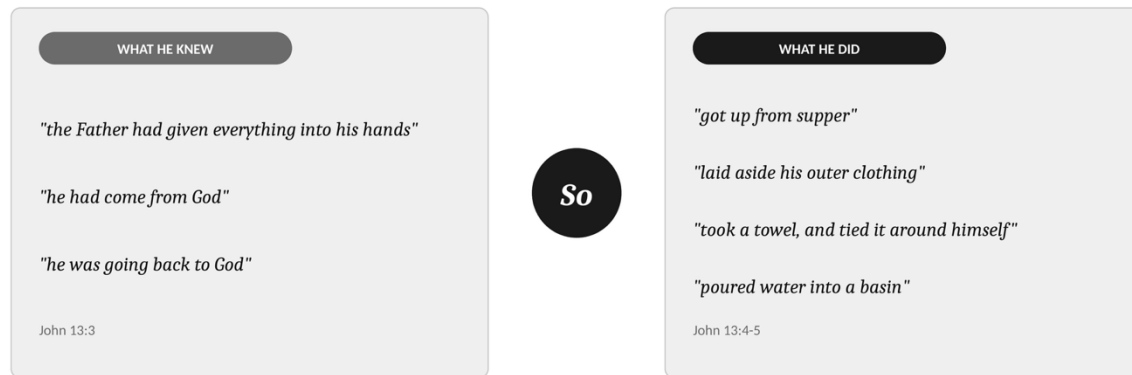
Jesus knew that the Father had given everything into his hands, that he had come from God, and that he was going back to God. So he got up from supper, laid aside his outer clothing, took a towel, and tied it around himself, John 13:3-4.

Read the two sentences together, because the second depends on the word *so*. Everything was in His hands. He knew where He had come from and where He was going. That is the fullest self-assessment on record, and the next thing that happens is that He lays aside His outer clothing and kneels in front of twelve pairs of dirty feet.

Next, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel tied around him, John 13:5.

He Knew, So He Knelt

John 13:3-5 · the fullest self-assessment anyone ever made



The towel was the measure, spent.

One of those pairs of feet belonged to Judas.

Then He said why. *For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done for you*, John 13:15. Here is what Romans 12:3 is about. Knowing the measure was never the goal. Knowing it is what frees a man to spend it, because a man settled on what he was handed has nothing left to prove in a room full of brethren. Paul reaches for the same root later: *Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus*, Philippians 2:5.¹¹

The towel was the measure, spent.

Conclusion and Application

The chapter moved in one direction the whole way: mercy before assignment, an honest estimate before any gift, and the manner of spending folded into the gift itself. The parts belong to one another as surely as they belong to Christ. And the fullest knowledge of a measure any man ever held produced a basin and a towel.

What did God hand you, and when did you last spend it on somebody in this congregation? Is there a gift you have refused to name because naming it felt like pride, or one you have named so often that the naming became the point? Is there mercy you have been showing with a sigh? Is there a brother whose work you have quietly graded as less necessary than your own?

Faithfulness is the assignment, and most of it is done where nobody is watching.

As God has distributed a measure of faith to each one, Romans 12:3. Someone in your congregation is waiting on what you were given.

For Discussion

1. What does “*therefore*” in Romans 12:1 refer back to? Why would Paul place the mercies of God before every command in this chapter?
2. The previous lesson ended at an altar where Christ gave Himself. Romans 12:1 puts the whole congregation on that same altar. What does Paul mean by presenting a body, and why does he call it true worship?
3. Romans 12:2 sets the renewing of the mind between two other things. Name them. Why would a renewed mind be necessary before Romans 12:3 becomes possible?
4. Paul warns against thinking of yourself *more highly than you should think*. What is the opposite error, and why does it fail the same verse?
5. Who does the distributing in Romans 12:3? What does that settle about comparison between members of a congregation?

6. Romans 12:5 says Christians are *individually members of one another*. What does that phrase add to being members of Christ?
7. List the seven gifts of Romans 12:6-8. Which of them require an audience, and which can be carried out unnoticed?
8. Paul attaches a manner to four of the gifts. Name the four. What does it suggest that mercy has to be shown *with cheerfulness*?
9. In John 13:3-5, what did Jesus know about Himself before He picked up the towel? How does that knowledge account for what He did with it?
10. Name one thing God has handed you that this congregation has not seen in a while. What would using it look like before our next class?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 3 – Love in Weakness, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Romans 12:3 warned every member against thinking too highly of himself. Lesson 3 finds Paul carrying something God gave him to keep that very thing from happening.

Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me, 2 Corinthians 12:7. Given. It is the same word Romans 12 uses of the gifts, and here it describes a subtraction rather than a supply.

Then the sentence that governs this whole quarter: *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness,* 2 Corinthians 12:9.

Before the next class, read 2 Corinthians 12:1-10. Count how many times Paul says he would rather not talk about himself, and then watch what he finally boasts about.

⁷ The verse turns on four forms of the *phren*- root: *hyperphronein*, *phronein*, *phronein*, and *sōphronein*. *Sōphroneō* is built from *sōs*, "safe, sound," and *phrēn*, the seat of thought, and carries the sense "to be of sound mind, be reasonable, sensible." BDAG, s.v. σωφρονέω. The verb appears six times in the New Testament: Mark 5:15; Luke 8:35; Romans 12:3; 2 Corinthians 5:13; Titus 2:6; 1 Peter 4:7. The Titus occurrence sits just above the text of Lesson 9.

⁸ *Charisma* is formed on *charis*, grace, with the suffix marking the result of an action. BDAG, s.v. χάρισμα. Paul uses the plural of the Romans list and again at 1 Corinthians 12:4, 12:9, 12:28, 12:30, and 12:31. The grace thread traced through Ephesians 4:29-32 in Lesson 1 runs directly into it.

⁹ *Haplotēs* carries the primary sense of "simplicity, sincerity, uprightness," and by extension "generosity, liberality." BDAG, s.v. ἀπλότης. It appears eight times in the New Testament, five of them in 2 Corinthians, where Paul is raising the collection for Jerusalem: 2 Corinthians 8:2; 9:11; 9:13. Lesson 12 works that passage.

¹⁰ *Hilarotēs* occurs only at Romans 12:8. The adjective *hilaros* occurs only at 2 Corinthians 9:7, the text of Lesson 13. BDAG, s.v. ἡλαρότης.

¹¹ The verb at Philippians 2:5 is *phroneite*, from the same root as Romans 12:3. Lesson 8 takes up that passage in full.