

ISH
Anything But ISH!
Romans 12:6-8

When you look back on your life at the end of your days, what do you want God to say about your legacy and impact? Do you want to simply be “in the ballpark” when it comes to your faith, or do you want to really be “in the game?” ISH is a series based on Romans chapter 12-13 about being more than mediocre in your walk with Christ. The **BASIS** for a life that is **anything but ISH** is found in the verses that many of us have chosen to memorize. Quote them with me: **Romans 12:1-2 NIV**

1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God--this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.

ISH is about giving your self wholly to the God that you adore! ISH is about refusing to give your self “wiggle room” for carelessness and apathy with the responsibilities and privileges you have as a follower of Christ. It is about embracing Christ's blameless character and glorious purpose as our SPECIFIC GOAL, not our approximate aim. It is about rising above the cultural norms of the society in which we live and standing out for Christ! God wants us to be much more than lukewarm and average in our Christian lives. He wants ANYTHING BUT ISH! **Today, we are going to continue on in our series by looking at HOW God shapes his children to be more than ISH for maximum impact in this world.**

I will never forget the first time that I ever stepped foot in New York City. It was overwhelming. The sheer size and number of the buildings in the city amazed me. This country boy had never seen so much concrete and so few trees in a city (except for the ones in Central Park and the ones growing on balconies several stories above ground!). It was a visual feast. It was also an overload of humanity. I have had that experience several times in the years since when I visited cities like Hong Kong and Cairo and Los Angeles. I had never seen so many apartment buildings and so many people in one place. I also saw something else. In New York, I saw all of the signs of POWER. I saw Wall Street and Times Square and the United Nations building. I stood on top of the World Trade Center just one month before it was devastated on 9/11. I was in AWE as I stood in this most famous of cities: a glorious picture of the mighty power of the United States of America. So, what does this have to do with ISH? Let's see!

How do you think it would have felt to be among the first Christians in a city like New York BEFORE Christianity was even a recognized movement in the world? **[Pause and think about this for a moment!]** I think it would have made me feel greatly OUTNUMBERED and SMALL! Being ISH would have been a safe bet in a

setting like that. Small targets are not easily hit! But the Apostle Paul (whose very name means “Small”) was not intimidated by the sheer size and power of the city that he was determined to visit on mission. **I have been trying to imagine just how Paul felt when he was making his plans to bring the Gospel to the city of Rome.** Rome was HUGE for its time. The city had a population of over 1 million citizens and then sported a million more slaves. Rome was the capital city of the mighty Roman Empire, and it LOOKED like it. Paul had been to great cities like Athens (with its Parthenon) and Ephesus (which contained the Temple of Artemis), but these cities were centers of intellectual and economic wealth that had been conquered by Rome! Rome was THE city of Power. Rome had the Roman Army and Caesar and the coliseum and the gladiators and huge monuments that celebrated Rome’s awesome military might over most of the great cities of the world; but Paul was NOT intimidated! He was willing to march boldly into this city with the Gospel, and he was not worried that he would be ignored or that his words would be irrelevant. The Gospel was not just a message for the religious people of Israel; it was life-saving truth for ALL people. This is why he wrote these great words:

Romans 1:16 NASB

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Do you sense any “ISHyness” in those words? I don’t! He had FAITH! Paul was a man who was confident in his God, and he exhibited it in every possible way. He was not arrogant or pushy; he was just CERTAIN that he had been entrusted with the revealed power of God for men, and that he was GIFTED to share it. He was ANYTHING BUT ISH, and he wanted the Christ-followers of Rome to be more than ISH as well. He wrote those few believers in Rome to let them know that he was on his way both to encourage them and to join in with them in presenting the Gospel to the citizens and slaves of this mighty nation. Paul was an ENERGIZER! He was an electric presence that helped to mobilize and encourage the existing members of the body of Christ to reach their full potential. **Romans 1:11-12 NASB**

11 For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; 12 that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine.

Paul did not write to comfort those Roman Christians because he was sad that they were living in such a godless, secular society. He did not come to make them feel better about a bad situation; he wrote to help them **understand** and **live out** the Faith that they claimed so that they could ROCK ROME with the Gospel! **He was like a doctor that discovers the cure for cancer and then walks into a cancer center where EVERY PERSON NEEDS what he has found! Paul knew that this vast city NEEDED the Gospel more than anything else! Do you believe that the Gospel still has the power to change our nation today?** I recently read several secular (i.e. – Non-Christian, outsider) accounts of the rise of the Roman Empire. Every

article that I read focused on the importance of people like Caesar Augustus, Tiberius, Nero, Tacitus, etc. These people were generals, powerful political leaders and advisors, or charismatic personalities. But every account that I read also pointed out the prime importance of one other unlikely leader: The Apostle Paul. They cited facts about his brilliance and his boldness and of his ultimate impact (through the spread of Christianity) on the formation and growth of the Roman Empire. **Imagine that! This one man without any political power or wealth (or the Internet!) helped to guide events that would shape Western Culture. He did more than that; he helped to shape the ETERNAL DESTINY of millions of people by the way that he used his God-given GIFTS in accordance with his God-given FAITH. But he did NOT do it ALONE!** Yes, he was a catalyst; but the change in the Western world came about because people heard and applied the message that he carried to them, and then they carried it to others as well as the redeemed Body of Christ.

Last week, you learned that God has placed each of his children in the context of a faith community that makes ALL of us much more powerful than ANY ONE of us. In other words, the MESSAGE that we proclaim and the MOVEMENT that we are a part of is bigger than any single man or woman, no matter how gifted they might be. It is also more powerful than any obstacle or enemy that we face. **But each individual DOES have a wonderful responsibility: We get to GIVE OUT what God has already GIVEN TO us.** You see, God has GIFTED each of his children with exactly what is needed to accomplish his will and purpose on this earth. This is why Paul wrote these next words. **Romans 12:6-8 NLT**

6 In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. 7 If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. 8 If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

Each of these ministry descriptions (prophecy, teaching, serving, etc.) are GIFTS OF GRACE that God has given to each of us according to his wisdom and will. **No one gift is more important than any of the other gifts, but we are each called to step out in faith and USE our individual gifts.** That is the only way to be IN THE GAME! We will examine what these gifts are in just a moment, but I want us FIRST to think about the KEY to EFFECTIVELY using our God-given gifts.

Our level of faith will determine the ultimate impact of our God-given gifts.

Do you want to have a big impact for God? You can, but you must understand how God will bring this about. **You see, our value to God is not based upon how much talent we may have in our life. It is based upon how dependent we are upon God**

in the use of our talents, no matter how big or small they may be. Paul said as much in the passage you read last week. **Romans 12:3 NIV**

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

This was the KEY to Paul's impact in his time. He was FIRST a man of great FAITH! He is living proof that someone with many important gifts but no faith is not nearly as useful to God as someone with a few gifts and a BIG FAITH! Paul was not a great orator or a charismatic personality. He suffered from a physical disability that made some people pull away from him. But he loved God and believed what God said to him, and he led the movement that changed the world! **If you truly believe in God enough to act on your faith before others, then there is no limit to what God can do through you!** That is precisely how the early church flipped the world upside down with the Gospel in a short time. The apostle John said, **"This is the victory that overcomes the world; even our FAITH!" Faith determines impact!** Paul taught that we should use our gifts in accordance with the faith that we have. People with faith in a big God change the world! This means that you can trust God to use you for his glory even in situations where you feel as insignificant as a mouse. **God is not limited to our littleness!** Like Paul, we must all learn to trust that God knew what he was doing when he gifted us, and he knew what he was doing when he placed us right where we are!

Let me ask you a question: How would you serve God differently if your faith in God were stronger? Would you finally step into that role serving children or teaching that class? Would you finally open your mouth and share the Gospel with that family member or that co-worker? Would you give more? **The only way to find out is to ACT on what God says. That is how your faith grows!** I will never forget when this church family asked me to be their pastor. I was terrified. I had truly reached the place where I did not feel worthy or capable of being a good pastor. I felt so less-than-qualified for the role that it made me want to run and hide. But I was reading through Romans in my quiet time during the period when I was asked to pray through my decision, and Romans 12 cleaned my clock! I saw that I was simply being asked to lay down my right to myself and trust God to use me where he had placed me with the gifts that he had given me. I did not have to become someone else. I just had to TRUST that He was bigger than my fears. I accepted the role by faith, and it has changed my life. **I wonder how stepping out in faith will change YOU?**

Now, there is no room for PRIDE in this, just "grate-full," "faith-full" obedience! God does not want us to be hung up on the fact that we may have fewer gifts than someone else in our church family. **He just wants us to USE the gifts that he has entrusted to us!** **Do YOU know who you are in Christ and how Christ has GIFTED and SHAPED you for HIS purposes in our world TODAY?** You should, and you can. Paul wrote these words (Vss. 6-8) to readers that KNEW what their

spiritual gifts were. If you do not yet know yours, then it is either because you are not yet begun ACTING on your God-given PASSION for serving God, or you LACK a passion for serving God. People with real passion cannot sit still. They have to DO something. And when you are motivated by your love for God to do something, then you begin to discover what you are best equipped to accomplish for God. **Years ago I was taught the principle that the best way to discover your spiritual gifts was to start helping out in some ministry context.** When you do this, you find yourself drifting toward that which you do best. **God himself will bring it out in you as you serve him.** This is why Paul strongly encourages the Christians of Rome to put their gifts into action! That is the entire focus of Romans 12:6-8. So, I ask you: **Are you putting your gift(s) into action or not? No one else can do it for you.** Now, there is another important principle that is found in Romans 12:6-8.

The way that you use your gifts should express the excellence of God's grace in you.

Paul makes it clear that we should use our God-given gifts [literally, "Grace-gifts"] with great faith and also with appropriate excellence. God wants HIS BEST **in us, from us!** He does not want you to make some half-hearted attempt to teach or serve or give. **He wants you by faith to refine those gifts through use to the point that you express them with excellence!** God's grace is glorious! See how he encourages us to use our gifts? He tells those who have the gift of prophecy [one who "speaks forth the mind and counsel of God"] to speak out with ALL of the faith that they have. He does not want you to be a timid prophet! He tells the teacher [one who explains and expounds Scripture to others] to teach well, and the servant [literally "deacon" - not the office, but the work!] to serve well. He tells the encourager [one who inspires others to keep going] to encourage with consistency, the leader [overseer] to lead with earnest zeal, the giver [one who shares from his own resources] to give generously, and the mercy givers [those who bring help to the wretched and needy] to show mercy cheerfully [literally, "with hilarity!"] **This is what it means to use your gifts in a manner that is appropriate to the proportion of FAITH and GRACE that God has given to you. It is a call to EMPTY OUT ALL that God has put within you, leaving nothing behind. It is a call to the EXCELLENCE of God-dependent, God-glorifying effort.**

Has it ever occurred to you that just as the grace you were given for salvation was undeserved, so the grace-gifts that you have been given are undeserved? You did not get those gifts because you had somehow earned them, but because God in his wisdom planned what HE wanted to accomplish through you. Remember his words. **Ephesians 2:10 NLT**

10 For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Once again, the proper expression of our grace-gifts is simply a reflection of the finished work that God has already done within us for the purposes that he has set

out for us! You are a masterpiece of God, and he wants to reveal his glory through you by the gifts that he has given to you. God makes no inferior products. His grace gifts are expressions of his love, and he only fits you with those gifts that properly show off his trophies of grace. **Why would you refuse to use that which God has done within you? There is only one reason: You don't believe that it is true!** My encouragement to you today is to GET BUSY discovering and using the gifts that God has entrusted to you with all diligence. Trust that he knows what he is doing! He may just lead you to walk into a city like New York to bring his Gospel to those who need it. You HAVE it, and they ALL need it.

Let's pray.