

### God has Gifted You to Serve!

(Romans 12:3–8) <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup> We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; <sup>7</sup> if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; <sup>8</sup> if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

In Christ Jesus, the Church's head and Savior, dear fellow redeemed,

A story is told about the time that Abraham Lincoln was about to meet with a group of clergymen at the White House. Prior to the meeting, a cabinet secretary entered Mr. Lincoln's office only to find him shining his shoes. Surprised by the sight, the official asked: "Mr. President, are you shining your own shoes?" Amused by the man's reaction, Mr Lincoln, answered "Whose shoes would I shine?"

I love that story because it speaks of the kind of humility many of us long to see in people who have risen to high office or have attained great fame or wealth. We love to discover that, end of the day, they're just like us, doing for themselves the kind of menial tasks required of all of us. But is that enough, to simply be like the rest of us? In other words, when it comes to this thing called humility, are we the gold standard? The Scriptures before us today, allow us to wrestle with this very subject and ask ourselves, "What does a humble life look like?" With the Bible's help, we'll seek to answer this question under the theme: God has Gifted You to Serve 1) as a recipient of his grace; and 2) as an agent of his grace.

Paul speaks to us today as a recipient of God's grace. He says, "**For by the grace given me I [write] to every one of you...**" (Romans 12:3) Grace is the undeserved kindness that God chooses to give us sinners, who because of our sinful nature, can never earn or merit his love.

For Paul, God's grace brought him to see that the very Jesus he had once arrogantly persecuted as an enemy of the Jewish church, was in fact its Savior, and for that matter, the Savior of all people. Paul was thrilled to know that, by grace, God had rescued him from certain death in hell and so saved him for unending life with God in heaven. And, as if there were not grace enough, the same undeserved kindness named Paul to be an apostle, that is, a spokesman for the very same Jesus he once hated. This amazing kindness was not lost on Paul. Instead it reshaped his thinking, not just about Jesus, but about all the people he knew and met. He wanted to serve all of them with the good news about sins forgiven and the heaven that awaits all who trust in Jesus as Savior. This is what Paul is doing for us today. He's serving us with the Word of God. He's showing us how its good news impacts our lives, reshaping all our thoughts and actions. To this end, he writes: "**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.**" (Romans 12:3).

Paul gets right to the point, putting his finger on a sin that plagues us all by nature – the arrogant attitude that we were born with. It's this attitude that never allows us to give in during an argument because you know that you're always right. It's arrogance that fuels our frustration when we're inconvenienced by a slow driver, or the person ahead of us in the checkout lane who can't seem to find the right coupon. You and your plans are too important to be put on hold for such people. Paul

says we ought not think this way about ourselves, not because doing so is distasteful, but because arrogance, like all sin, is dangerous and damning. We shouldn't think this way and we no longer have to.

That's because God's grace has delivered us from sin's power and punishment and so has freed us to think of ourselves in a new and sober, that is, sensible way in keeping with the faith God has given us. Faith teaches us that when God's grace found us, we were all lost and helpless. Not one of us was more important than anyone else. And the same holds true now. By grace, we've all received the same gift of faith. We all trust in the same Jesus and are all blessed by him in a variety of ways. None of these blessing is better than another. They are simply different and that for a very good reason. Paul explains: **"For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, <sup>5</sup> so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."** (Romans 12:4-5).

The gifts that God gives to you and me were not given for the purpose of making any of us feel more special or more important or more entitled than anyone else. Instead, we should think of ourselves together with our fellow Christians as members of the same body, each having need of the other. Wouldn't it be ridiculous, if for example, a baseball pitcher's arm thought itself more important than the pitcher's brain which determines which pitch to throw, or the pitcher's fingers that release the ball at the right time with the right spin, or the pitcher's feet which know just how to kick through the pitch? No member of that pitcher's body is more or less important. All are meant to work together with their different gifts.

So it is with us Christians. We are members together of the body of Christ who is our head. It isn't enough to just see ourselves as equals. Christian humility goes beyond that. It elevates the needs and desires of others over our own. I think back to President Lincoln's question: "Whose shoes would I shine?" In the kingdom of this world, it might seem like a great act of humility when an important person says, "You don't have to shine my shoes. I'll shine them myself." But in the kingdom of grace, Christ-like humility is found not in my willingness to shine my own shoes, but in my willingness to shine yours and, better yet, wash your feet as Jesus washed those of his disciples. You see, as a recipient of God's grace, God has gifted us not to serve self, but to serve each other and so act on his behalf as an agent of his grace.

Paul says: **"We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us."** (Romans 12:6). Just as each member of the human body has a different function, so we, who form the body of Christ have different functions within the church. In his grace and wisdom, God has gifted each of us in different ways to carry out our different roles so that each of us might be a blessing to all the others.

In keeping with this truth, Paul runs through a sample group of blessings. The purpose is not to list every blessing that God gives, but rather to get us to think about how to use the gifts we have been given. For example: **"If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith;"** (Romans 12:6). To prophesy involves listening to what God says and then speaking his Word to others. The one prophesying is not to let this work go to his head. He's not run off at the mouth, spouting his own thought and opinions. His sole purpose to be a blessing to others by speaking words that do not depart in any way or to any degree from the saving truths God has given us to believe and confess.

Likewise, **"...if [your gift] is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; <sup>8</sup> if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully."** (Romans 12:7-8). As I mentioned, Paul's list is not meant to be a complete inventory of all the gifts that God gives the members of his church. But I think you'll agree, it covers a lot of gifts you often hear us asking for in our bulletin and after-service announcements. In recent weeks we've been in search of Sunday School teachers and Life Group leaders. We've put out calls for choir members and instrumentalists. We often seek the services of ushers, greeters, and Coffee Café workers. We look for long-time members to sponsor

those who are new to Mount Olive and in this way encourage them to be active in worship and involved in congregational life. We need people to serve on the snow removal teams and on the church cleaning crew. We need people who are willing to serve in mercy ministry by helping with our food pantry or by supplying the needs of those who have suffered some setback in life. The list is long, and at times, the workers are few.

Why is that? Maybe it's because we read or hear an announcement for help and conclude that we just don't have the time to serve right now. That happens. We certainly have busy lives. But doesn't this highlight the importance of working together with our gifts – each of us doing something so that a few people aren't left to do everything?

Maybe it happens that we hear a plea for help and conclude that we don't have the gifts the congregation is seeking right now. Again, this may be true. Or such thinking might be the product of false humility. I've heard it said that humility isn't a matter of thinking less of yourself; true humility means thinking of yourself less. This definition seems to be the one Paul has in mind. When I spend more time thinking about you, the members of Christ's body and less time thinking about me, I'm much more likely to try my hand at serving in some way rather than dismissing the notion out of hand.

So how do we know what sorts of service we might be good at? You could ask your pastor or some other Christian friend. We might see in you gifts that you don't recognize. Or you could just try something and keep trying until you find the service that's right for you. It's a bit like signing your kids up for Little League. You don't sign them up for a certain position. If you did, you'd end up with a whole team of pitchers. Instead, the coaches keep trying the players out at different positions until they find the one that fits. That works here at Mount Olive too. We'll help you figure it out.

In fact, we'll try to do that today. In the atrium we've set up a few tables, each representing a different area of ministry in which we could use some help. Take some time following the service to have a look. If there's someone seated at the table, feel free to ask some questions about that particular area of service. If you're not ready to commit to serving, that's ok. Take some time and pray about it. And as you pray, please remember that none of this is meant to "guilt" you into serving. Guilt is a terrible motivator, and most importantly, it's the opposite of everything that Jesus wants for you. He has taken away your guilt – all of it. He, the perfect Son of God, was willing to stand in as the substitute of us sinners. He took ownership of our arrogance and selfishness. Our sin became his. In the greatest act of humility this world has ever known, God's Son, thinking nothing of himself, thinking only of us, carried all our sins, and the sins of all into the depths of hell itself where he suffered the wrath of God until all that righteous anger was spent and all that remained was God's full forgiveness for you and me and all believers.

There is no guilt! There is no shame! There is only grace, grace that covers you with Jesus' humility and with his selfless spirit every moment of every day. God wants his grace to fill you up, so that you can live your life knowing how happy, how pleased he is with you. He wants you to see how gifted you are in his eyes. In fact, he thinks so highly of you, that he has named you as an agent of his grace, providing you with gifts and the opportunities to put them to use in a way that causes his grace and goodness to spill over from your life into the lives of the people all around you – for their good and to God's glory. Amen.