

The Gospel According to Paul: Romans

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Counsel Concerning Relationships (12:3-13:14)

Immediately following his admonition to his readers to be transformed by the renewing of their minds, Paul takes up the problem of attitudes. By attitudes is meant, "a state of mind, feeling or disposition, one's thinking or mind-set toward." Paul deal's with the ultimate attitude problem - attitude toward oneself, then follows with a discussion of one's attitude toward others, then broadens the discussion to one's attitude concerning the authority figures of civil government, then discusses the relationship between love and duty, and concludes with an plea for morally responsible behavior.

One's Attitude Toward Oneself (12:3-8)

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. ⁴For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, ⁵so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. ⁶Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; ⁷or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; ⁸he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

Paul's first matter of concern is one's thinking concerning himself. "Do not think of yourselves more highly than you ought," he instructs, "but rather think of yourselves with sober judgment." There is a word-play on the word "think" in the Greek text. "Think" is from the Greek word *phroneo*, which means to think, consider, take thought, be of a certain frame of mind or mind-set, or be of a certain opinion. The expression, "think more highly" is the Greek word *huper-phroneo* and literally means high thinking, to have high thoughts, or to be high-minded. As used here it means to have an overly high opinion of oneself. Then there is the expression, "sober judgment," which is from the Greek word *so-phroneo*, meaning to think sensibly, use good judgment, to be in one's right mind. The word play Paul develops with *phroneo* here is a literary device often found in Hebrew poetry where similar sounding words are danced about in the text, having a somewhat hidden meaning which dawns upon the reader when perceiving the word play.

This word play is as follows. Paul says, "Do not think (*phroneo*) of yourselves more highly than you ought to think (*huper-phroneo*), but rather think (*phroneo*) of yourselves with sober thinking (*so-phroneo*). Paul's choice of this word to describe one's thinking is significant in that *phroneo* is from the word *phren* meaning the diaphragm, which is where ancient man believed his deepest thoughts and feeling originated. We express a similar concept when we speak of what a man really thinks down deep inside - his innermost thinking, or as a person thinks in his heart of hearts, which in Hebrew thought was where all thought and emotion dwelt, in the deeper chambers of one's being (cf. 12:16, where Paul uses this same term in three occurrences).

As a Man Thinks in His Heart

Paul is here striking at the heart of the human problem - our thinking concerning ourselves. "As a man thinks in his heart," says Proverbs 23:7, "so is he." This saying can have a negative application as well as positive. Self/ego-centeredness, over concern with our selves, our opinions, and what we think people ought to think about what we think is usually at the root of most relationship problems. Such persons can ruin a relationship. When both parties of a relationship have such an attitude, discord and conflict are sure to result.

Paul informs his readers that high-mindedness (*huperphroneo*) is not a

characteristic of new creation existence. Jesus said, "Come learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart," (Matt 11:29). If he is our Lord and we are his servants, then our attitude must be like his. He also said, "a disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his lord," (Matt. 10:24). Perhaps, one of the church's greatest problems, in both past and present alike, is addressed here. It is sad to think of how much damage has been done through the centuries by people who think too highly of their opinions, whether on doctrinal matters, morals, personal prejudice, classism, or simply matters of personal taste, and have insisted on imposing their thinking on everyone else. Such "servants" have a mind to be "lords" and have their own following. Paul, in this section on apostolic counsel, tells his readers that such people are not in a right mind (*sophroneo*).

The Gifts of Grace

The church consists of people who have experienced new creation in Christ. Their existence is a new existence characterized by the reign of grace (Rom 5:1-5, 20b-21). Paul says in 12:3 that he is speaking by (i.e., his inspiration is a result of) the power of that grace. Then, in verses 6-8, he informs his readers that certain of them have gifts resulting from this same power of grace. These are called *charismata* (gifts of grace) from *charis* the Greek word for grace. In verse 6 he says, "We have different gifts (*charismata*), according to the grace (*charis*) given us."

Here we are given significant insight into Paul's concept of grace or *charis*. This word is used in the Greek speaking Mediterranean world with a number of meanings. The most essential meaning was that of kindness or favor shown - an emotional disposition toward, to be gracious to someone. *Charis*, however, was also used to speak of a special gift one may possess. This was especially so in certain religious writings where *charis* was spoken of as a special gift or empowerment one possessed. We see this usage in Paul's writings, as may be seen in Rom 5:1-5, 20-21, where *charis* is spoken of as a reigning power set over against the reigning power of sin. Just as sin may be a reigning power in us, grace may also be a reigning power in our lives. Paul is clearly saying to his readers that they possess certain gifts which were a result of the power of grace at work in their lives; this is specifically stated in verse 6, "having gifts (*charismata*) according to the grace (*charis*) given to us."

Important for us to see here is that many of these gifts (*charismata*)

are not gifts possessing supernatural characteristics. In fact, of the six gifts mentioned, only one (prophecy) may be classified as a gift having supernatural characteristics. The other gifts are: ministry (*diakonia*), teaching (*didaskalia*), encouraging (*parakalesis*), sharing/giving (*metadidomi*), providing leadership (*proistamenos* - to stand before), and showing mercy [benevolence] (*eleon*).

All of these gifts are essential to the church, only one of them (prophecy) is supernatural in character; all of them, however, are called *charismata* (i.e., charismatic gifts or gifts of grace). For one to serve well in any of these roles, there must be grace in his life; or more specifically, there must be a presence of the power of *charis* at work in his life. When a person's life is full of grace, that life cannot be full of self. An existence full of self is usually an existence devoid of grace.

Identifying Your Gift

How does one determine what his/her gift is? It is often the thing one is very good at, or the thing one enjoys doing because they feel a great sense of fulfillment in the doing of it. People who are gifted in a given area usually excel in that area. They often have an enthusiasm for that at which they are gifted; given that the word enthusiasm is from the Greek word “*en-theos*,” meaning “God within,” this seem a good way to say that one’s area of giftedness may be the area about which he or she feels the greatest amount of enthusiasm.

Ministry

If one’s love is ministry (*diakonia*), and one is good at working with and serving people, then this may be his or her area of giftedness. The term *diakonia* occurs in the NT 34 times; it is translated in all occurrences as “ministry” or “service.” The verb *diakoneo* is found 37 times and is translated, “to minister” or “to serve,” with exception of 1 Tim 3:10 and 13, where it is translated, “use the office of deacon” (which is not a legitimate translation). The noun *diakonos* is found 30 times and is translated “minister” or “servant,” with except of three occurrences where it is not translated but is transliterated as “deacon.” In fact, the term “deacon” is a term which was created to avoid translation, and has left us with a non-word which prevents the reader of the NT from knowing what is actually being said by the writer.

These Greek words all have to do with serving or ministering to people, and should be translated in all their occurrences as “to minister or serve,” “ministry or service,” or a “minister” or “servant.” The term “deacon” is like the word “baptism,” a word which would have created a theological problem if actually translated. Neither are translations of the Greek terms lying behind them; rather, they are transliterations of the term that avoids the actual translation of the term. The KJV translators did not wish to translate the Greek term *baptizo* as “to immerse,” for obvious reasons. As for the term “deacon,” it was created to avoid the implication that the *diakanos* Paul mentions in 1 Tim 3:10 and 13 was to be married. So a new “office” was created and titled, “deacon” to distinguish him from “a minister.” At the time of the translation of the KJV, the Roman Catholic priesthood was celibate, as were most of the protestant clergy. Even though the text could not be understood that marriage for the minister was mandatory (there were exceptions in such persons as Paul, Timothy, etc., who were called *diakanos*, but were not married), the option of marriage presented by translating this term as “minister” was not desired.

Teaching

Those possessing the gift of teaching (*didaskalia*), are usually those for whom teaching is passion. The gift of teaching is most usually found in those having a special love for teaching. They are good at making people think and teaching people how to think for themselves, and are effective in communicating ideas or concepts in such a way that they become intelligible and/or understandable to others. Most people know when they have been taught by a teacher whose teaching skills and passion can be truly called a gift. History, both secular and sacred, has remembered and honored such persons, and most knowledge owned by the human race has been passed through the centuries, from one generation to another, by persons called a teacher, or more affectionally, “*ho didaskalos mou* – my teacher.”

Encouraging

Some people seem to have a special talent for encouraging others, for helping others to work through problems, whether internal personal problems or external relationship difficulties. These people are usually gifted in *parakalesis*, the Greek word for counseling or encouraging others. This is the term used by Jesus to identify the role and work of the Holy Spirit who would be with the twelve following the ascension of Jesus. The Greek word

literally means, “to stand along side,” whether to give counsel, advice, encouragement, or to empower someone by standing with them, as Paul uses the term in 2 Cor 1:3-7, translated in many versions as “comfort” or “consolation” which comes from God. The essential idea of *parakalesis* is that of giving encouragement by standing beside or with someone.

Sharing

The gift of *metadidomi* is more difficult to identify; the Greek word literally means, “to give a part of, to share with.” This is the word John the Baptist uses in Luke 3:11, “The man with two tunics should share with (*metadidomi*) him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.” It is also found in Eph 4:28, where Paul says, “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with (*metadidomi*) those in need.” This gift is a gift of grace *par excellence*; it is rare to find a person truly gifted with this attitude and disposition, and it is a gift which cannot co-exist with selfishness.

Leadership

Then there is the gift of *proistamenos*, literally, “the one standing before,” it is a term for one who provides leadership. The ability to lead others well is a gift in the truest sense of the word. It is, essentially, a role of responsibility rather than authority. Although one cannot assume the responsibilities of leadership without the authority necessary to fulfilling the responsibility, leadership is, essentially, a role of responsibility more than authority.

The generals of England did not recognize George Washington as a professionally trained soldier, but admitted that he possessed a gift that none of them could match; namely, the gift of leadership. One of these generals, after being defeated in a battle where the British Regulars heavily outnumbered Washington’s Colonial Army, declared that the reason for their defeat was George Washington himself; his army, this general observed, would follow him anywhere.

Showing Mercy

The last gift mentioned by Paul is “*ho eleon*,” which translates as, “the

one showing mercy,” commiseration, the capacity to show sympathy and empathy to someone in trouble. Our most common way of expressing this idea is with the word “benevolence.” This is not the word for a program, but a disposition one possesses toward others. It is to have a benevolent attitude toward those who stand accused or who are guilty and deserve justice for their behavior. It is the case that people do have a right to feel ill-will toward those who have wronged them, but the new commandment of Jesus to love one another and forgive those who have wronged us does not allow the follower of Jesus the exercise of that “right.”

One of the greatest concerns of most people is that their rights be recognized by others. When this doesn’t happen, what is our recourse? We can see that our rights are enforced by the proper authorities, and this is a legitimate course of action in some situations, or we may choose to show *agape* (good will) toward those with whom kindness and mercy may accomplish more than the enforcement of our rights. It can truly be said that to know how and when to do this is a gift. Some people clearly have the ability and desire to call upon this gift when and wherever they have the opportunity. In this person, *charis* (grace) truly dwells, and that person’s attitude can be called “a gift of God.”

Conclusion

The gifts of grace mentioned here by Paul surface again and again in the remaining texts of Romans 12:9-15:32. What Paul appears to be doing here is presenting the reader with a listing of those gifts of grace, which are most needed in the growth of a community of believers. He then presents a scenario of situations in which these gifts may be applied. In 12:9-12, he presents situations which call for the believers to possess and manifest a proper attitude toward one another; in 13:1-7 he addresses the issue of dealing with worldly or civil authority; in 13:1-8 he addresses issues of conflict or disagreement which contrast love and duty.

Then in 14:1-12 he addresses the issue of the Jewish concerning kosher or dietary foods and the place of Jewish holy days; in 14:13-23, he speaks to the believer’s responsibility to the role of moral conscience. In 15:1-4, he encourages the strong to be considerate of the concerns and immaturity of the weak; in 15:5-13, he issues a plea for unity between the Jewish and Gentile segments of the church.

What need would there be for these gifts in this situation: the gift of ministry (*diakonia*), teaching (*didaskalia*), encouraging (*parakalesis*), sharing/giving (*metadidomi*), providing leadership (*proistamenos* - to stand before), and showing mercy [benevolence] (*eleon*)?

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