

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!

“On Mission” for the Great Commission

Study #20

(Romans 12:3-8)

Introduction: Planning is (NOT) everything...

For all of us, planning is important. For preachers, sermon planning is important. Not just preparation for a given message, but planning for what to preach.

So, several times a year I prayerfully think through where I perceive we need to look in God’s Word together and plan my messages accordingly.

Sometimes - and I love it when this happens - what I have planned to speak about dovetails perfectly with what the Lord is doing in someone’s personal life or with something going on here at church.

Several times in recent months, PT Gaines has told me that what I had to say reinforced the message to the teens on this or that morning. It’s not that we planned it. It just happened. God’s little sovereign serendipity.

I love it when someone tells me after I finish speaking on a Sunday morning that the passage I was dealing with was exactly the passage or the truth that God had been dealing with them on during the previous week.

(It’s only slightly discouraging when the passage they mention is in Psalms and I was preaching Philippians. Oh well...)

Coincidence? As far as my planning goes, sure. But God knows what He’s up to.

Well, I’m glad to report that this is one of “those days” when several streams come together on one Sunday.

For quite a long time I have been planning on speaking about Romans 12:3-8 today. But I will honestly tell you that I hadn’t figured that this passage would tie in so perfectly with the Easter season we have just concluded or with the season we are about to launch this morning.

Back To Romans

This morning we are back in Paul’s letter to the Romans. It’s been a while since we’ve been here.

In fact, the last time you and I were looking into Romans together (which was in February!) we listened as Paul told us to present ourselves to God as living sacrifices.

In light of our celebration last week remembering Christ’s passion - which was for us! - that’s clearly the only reasonable way to live.

In Romans 12:1-2 Paul urged us to climb up on the altar and offer ourselves to God based on the *“mercies of God”* we have received. Easter reminded us of the principal mercies that have come our way through Jesus’ death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead.

So, up on the altar we joyfully go! That is the place to be if we want real growth and personal transformation in Jesus.

The altar is also the place to be if we hope to be used by God to advance His Kingdom. The twin dreams of being conformed to the image of Jesus AND of being used by God to advance His kingdom are realized when we commit all that we are to Him, based on all He has done for us.

Those dreams are our dreams. We want transformation and we want lives that count for His kingdom.

Well, today, Paul gets personal and he gets particular about how to get there. He urges us to specific action. And he paints a picture of YOU - an integral part of God’s Kingdom advancing team - “on mission” for the Great Commission.

Let's think of Paul's instructions today as a three-part course in how we might become fit for God's use.

Part one will involve coming to a sober assessment about who we are. Or, as the ancient Greeks used to say it, "*Know thyself.*"

Christian, Know Thyself! (v. 3)

[3] For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you¹ not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

God had graced Paul with a special stewardship. He appointed Paul the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul knew who he was in Jesus and he knew what he had been gifted to do for Jesus.

Each of us is to come to a similarly sober self-evaluation of our strengths and weaknesses, passions and abilities and gifts and calling. You are to know yourself, what drives you, what moves you, what you love doing.

As we move toward self-understanding, there are two potential pitfalls we need to avoid like the plague.

On the one hand, we have to watch out for conceit and arrogance.

Call to Sober Evaluation

Beware the danger of arrogance and pride

That is the thought behind the words, "***not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think.***"

It is true that many among us suffer from a lack of confidence and from feelings of inferiority. But it is also true that none of us are immune to the disease of an inflated sense of self-importance.

Here, the Bible is calling us each to humility. Christian humility takes an honest look at who we are and asks, "*How might who I am and what I have to offer most powerfully fit into God's plan to bless the world?*"

I don't have the solutions to all the problems or the answers to all the questions.

If I end up thinking that I do, and barge in to offer what isn't needed, I do more harm than good. If I forget that there's only one Messiah, I've got an inflated notion of my place in the overall scheme of things. That's called arrogance.

Now, if I were to ask, "*Have you ever known anyone who had an inflated view of himself or herself?*" I would probably get a Worship Center's full of raised hands. That's because, as we all know, pride and arrogance is a widespread problem with other people. 😊

But what's clear is that if most everybody here has known someone who has been guilty of arrogance, then there is a very strong likelihood that most of us are guilty of arrogance as well.

Invite honest feedback from those who knew you well

The inability to see our weaknesses is epidemic. For instance, how many people have ever told you, "*I'm really not that good of a driver.*"

Almost everyone I know is an above average driver.

I've read that 90% of the population believes that they are above average when it comes to intelligence. I suspect that most of us believe we are above average when it comes to honesty, looks, athletic ability, strength, and adorableness of grandkids.

People who are used by God have a sober evaluation of who they are.

So, how can we gain this realistic sense of ourselves? Well, we might try doing what world-class athletes do.

¹ In all of these verses, Paul speaks personally, as he refers to himself with the first person, "I." It is clear that he is addressing the individuals in the church at Rome.

They seek input. They hire trainers to help them by pointing out weaknesses and poor body mechanics.

Mike Singletary, formerly of the Chicago Bears and one of the greatest linebackers to ever play in the NFL, was famous for seeking out advice and correction to improve.

Why not ask your friends to honestly assess you. Seek their input. Ask them the hard, honest questions. A true friend will shoot straight with you. You'll be better off for it - and so will the work of God through you when you see yourself as you really are.

So, pride is one danger to avoid. The other pitfall is that we might deny strengths and gifts God has given us.

Call to Grateful Recognition

Give thanks for God's gifting

That is why Paul also says that we are ***“to think so as to have sound judgment.”***

It would be a mistake for any of us to think that we have nothing to contribute to God's work. The truth is that every believer in Jesus is graced by the Holy Spirit to serve and to bless and to make kingdom-of-God kinds of impact.

Every person in whom the Spirit dwells - every Christian - is designed by God to make a difference for Jesus in this world.

God doesn't want you to envy someone else's contribution. He wants you to appreciate and use the gifts with which He has graced you and to make your own contribution.

The road we are to follow to come to a true sober self-evaluation is captured in Paul's words. Listen again.

[3] For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

In Jesus, all of us have LOTS in common. We all have a measure of faith. We all have a gift to share.

And, in Jesus, all of us have a unique contribution to make.

You have a unique contribution to make to His work

If you are rightly related to the Lord through faith and if you are presenting yourself to God as a living sacrifice, then regardless of your age, gender, wealth, education, or station in life, you have something vital to offer to Jesus' work.

Equipped with the knowledge that you are loved by God and are part of His plan, God wants to launch you into His work.

You are gifted. You can't do everything - but you can do something. You aren't omnipotent, but by God's strength you can be a potent force for Him. You can be someone God uses to serve His kingdom. Or, as I like to say it, you can be “on mission” for the Great Commission.

Now, if you will look around you, you will see other people here. You are with friends and family and brothers and sisters in Christ.

Part of the beauty of God's plan is that you and I are to be “on mission” as a part of a team. We aren't long rangers. We're very definitely in this together.

The together-ness factor prompts Paul to use a figure of speech to refer to the church that has stuck through the centuries. He calls the church a “body.”

Christian, You Must Understand “Body” Mechanics! (vv. 4-6a)

[4] For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function [5] so we, who are many, are one body² in Christ, and individually members one of another. [6a] Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each is to exercise them accordingly.

² This is the only time in Romans where the church is referred to as a body.

MULTIPLICITY in the Body of Christ.....

As it is in the human body...

It is a self-evident truism that our bodies have lots and lots of different parts.

Fingers and toes, eyes and ears, arms and legs, public and private parts, inside and outside parts - all these make up the human body.

Paul says that's how it is in the church, too. There is multiplicity in the makeup of the Body of Christ.

...so it is in the Body of Christ, the church

The many Christians in this congregation, in San Antonio, in the world, and through time all make up the universal Body of Christ.

As Paul says here, we in the Body of Christ are many.

And, in addition to there being multiplicity in the human body and in the Body of Christ, so are there relationships between the members.

COMMUNITY in the Body of Christ

That is the thought behind the phrase, *[we are] individually members one of another.*

In the human body, each part has its own distinctive work to do. In a healthy body all the parts function interdependently for the good of the whole.

When that same dynamic occurs in a fellowship of believers who make up a local "body", it's magic. We call it "community."

And Paul assures us this morning that we all need our brothers and sisters if we are going to mature normally and to serve maturely.

My growing conviction is that if you and I are going to be the useful, transformed people Jesus saved us to become, we must learn to love each other.

So, **multiplicity** is a fact in both the human body and in the church. And **community** (shared life, love, interdependence) is to be a growing reality in the church.

However, community, which is a beautiful goal, is a challenge because of the third reality Paul mentions here: **diversity**.

DIVERSITY in the Body of Christ

[12:6] And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly.

The beauty of mutual appreciation

As we have already looked around the room this morning and noticed multiplicity, so now if we take a second look around, we will note diversity.

Each human body is different from every other human body. And every part of each human body is different from every other body part.

The individual members of our bodies don't argue with each other or envy each other about their relative importance.

Hands appreciate feet. Necks support heads. Heads are glad for shoulders. Knees need hips.

When there is a problem with body parts not getting along, it is disastrous.

The tragedy of in-fighting

For instance, my brother-in-law, Don Kerr, had a kidney transplant a few years ago. If he doesn't take regular anti-rejection medication, that replacement kidney will be killed by his own body, which sees the new kidney as an outsider.

Auto-immune problems - like Rheumatoid Arthritis, Multiple Sclerosis, Lupus, and Type 1 Diabetes - are tragic because in these disorders a person's immune system mistakenly attacks and destroys its own healthy tissue.

That is a picture of what happens when Christians DON'T get along, DON'T love each other, and DON'T serve well together.

But it's a beautiful thing when we all take our direction from the Head - Jesus - and work together as a diverse, cooperative community.

Diversity - God's way of doing things!

This - cooperation IN diversity - is the mark of God's handiwork. It's His typical style.

In nature there is no repetitive, monotonous uniformity. No two trees, snowflakes, sand dunes, mountains, cliffs or clouds are exactly alike.

So also in Jesus. What He has done has been to collect people with the most diverse backgrounds, temperaments, interests, and capacities you can imagine.

Believers in Jesus come from all walks of life, from all kinds of church traditions, from countless nations, from various political persuasions, from all races, and from all socio-economic strata.

And that diversity of outlook, strengths, weaknesses, and passions contributes powerful to the overall work. His work goes forward *best* when we are *most* appreciating the contributions others make to the CAUSE that we don't make or that we can't make.

Fer instance...

We have announced Vacation Bible School for this summer. For a whole bunch of years, VBS has been one great week of serving kids every summer. It provides a great opportunity for lots of men and women and teens to serve together and to grow together.

But I know people who are not drawn to want to help with Vacation Bible School. That makes them neither unspiritual nor mean-spirited. It doesn't mean that they don't like kids. They just don't want to help with VBS.

I praise God for our church's work in supporting what God is doing cross-culturally.

Some Christians have gone out on to the mission field from our church. Most haven't. Some people have gone out on short-term missions trips. Most haven't. Some serve on the Missions Committee. Most don't.

Those who haven't are not saying that they don't believe in missions. That is simply not where they are drawn to serve. They are drawn to serve elsewhere.

And we've got a really healthy youth ministry that serves middle schoolers and high schoolers. Leading that charge is PT Gaines, along with Jack and Sue Biros, Kelly Blake, Mike Hannan, Tiffany Head and a host of other great volunteers.

Even if you are not serving in the youth ministry, aren't you glad that these are serving teens!?

Jacob Rusch leads our Praise Team. I'm sure glad that there are gifted musicians and singers who join him on the stage each week. And I'm also glad that they can each do something that I can't do!

It would be wrong for me to expect that all Christians will have the same passions and interests that I do. I am to praise God for your unique gifting just as you are to praise Him for the unique gifting of others here today.³

So, we do not exist for ourselves. We are members one of another. We are many (multiplicity) and different (diversity), yet we are a community making one Body.

And, when each one of us contributes what we can, the Body of Christ works as it was designed to work and the cause of Christ moves forward.

³ The temptation, though, is that rather than be attracted by the differences between us, rather than enjoying the God-ordained diversity in the Body, we are put off by the diversity. We are tempted to think, "*What a dumb way to view the matter*" when someone raises an objection to our view or voices an opposing opinion. How much better - unless their different view is against the Bible's teaching - to think, "*What an interesting way to look at something. I would never have seen it that way!*"

And that is where Paul lands here at the end. He suggests a few of the ways in which different Christians contribute to the cause in very different ways.

Christian, Put Your Gifts to Use! (vv. 6-8)

[6b] if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; [7] if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; [8] or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

Now, obviously, in the time we have today, I'm not going to attempt a full-blown discussion of spiritual gifts. I have done so in other places, though, and it is important to understand the gifts of the Spirits.

If you want to look at the New Testament passages where spiritual gifts are discussed, check out 1 Corinthians 12, this passage (Romans 12), Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4.

You could check out a series of messages I gave back in July and August for an overview of the gifts. (www.nwchurch.org)

Plus there are lots of great books out there dealing with the topic (I would especially recommend Forgotten God by Francis Chan, and The Holy Spirit by Charles Ryrie), and I've included a few notes as an add-on to the written manuscript of this message. (see the Appendix)

But here in Romans 12 Paul's purpose is NOT to develop a comprehensive theology of spiritual gifts. What he is telling us is that in whatever area of service you have been gifted - serve!

Do you have a burden to speak for the Lord? That's what prophets and teachers and exhorters do. Well then, speak!⁴

Do you have a passion to serve, to meet practical needs in Jesus' Name? Well don't just sit there, serve someone! Show mercy to people in need.

⁴ I do not want to draw overly hard and fast distinctions between prophecy, teaching, and exhortation. Each one certainly has its own distinctive, but each includes elements of the others.

Are you wired to organize, to lead, to cast vision, or to organize and administrate? Put those precious skills to use! And do it diligently.

Does nothing make you happier than throwing money and material resources at Gospel-centered ministries? Do you just LOVE to give to people in need? Great! Do that. Give with reckless abandon! Give hilariously!

When it comes to our particular giftings from God, here is what we each need to know:

- The Holy Spirit has sovereignly distributed His ministry gifts to each and every one God has redeemed by their faith in Jesus.
- That means that YOU have been gifted by God. YOU can make impact for Jesus in the church and in the world. YOU can be "on mission" for the Great Commission.

Conclusion:

So, you've climbed up on the altar. Because of the mercies you have received, you have presented yourself as a living sacrifice to God.

Great!

Now, have you stepped up to the plate to put your gifts and talents to use for Him? Are you looking for ways to serve His purposes, motivated by gratitude for what He has done for you?

The stakes are high. The time is right. The need is now.

When we know ourselves - our strengths and weaknesses, our God-given talents and abilities - and step out in faith to be "on mission" for the Great Commission, the world will see the Body of Christ today, just as surely as the world saw it when Jesus walked the streets of Nazareth!

Now... LAUNCH!!

Appendix: The giftings of Romans 12

Prophecy - Proclaim the Truth!!

Paul says here that prophecy should be done according to the prophet's faith, or in line with the prophet's faith.

A fine thought - but what does he mean? What does he mean by prophecy? And what does he mean by **“according to the proportion of his faith”**?

First, think of the prophet's role throughout biblical history. Prophecy actually plays a major role in God's dealings with His people.

(An important distinction to keep in mind is that, biblically, the priest spoke *to* God on behalf of the people; the prophet spoke *to* the people on behalf of God.)

In the Old Testament

There are many, many places in the Old Testament where the prophet told the future by means of special revelation from God. However, the far more frequent function of the prophetic role in the Old Testament was *“forth-telling,”* not *“fore-telling.”*

Read through the prophetic books of the Old Testament (16 of the 39 Old Testament books are prophetic!) and you will find some very specific and dramatic predictions of the future by the major and minor prophets.

However, on virtually *every page*, you will find the prophets bringing God's Word to bear on the sins of the people, on their rebellion, speaking out against societal ills, calling God's people to repentance, and urging them to walk with or return to the Lord.

So, there is the two-fold aspect of “prophecy” in the Old Testament of “fore-telling” (prediction) and “forth-telling” (proclamation).

Likewise, in the New Testament, there is a dual thrust to the prophetic role.

In the New Testament

Of course, there are notable examples of people who predicted the future in the New Testament. But, the more prominent feature of “prophecy” was that of proclaiming God's message, as found in the Gospel.

So, what is the *prophecy* Paul is referring to here in Romans 12?

I believe that Paul is not primarily referring here to predictive (“fore-telling”) prophecy, but to the proclamation (“forth-telling”) of the message of God.

Why do I say this? Well, if you look carefully at the phrase, you find that Paul literally said, **“if prophecy, in proportion to (or “in agreement”) with [the] faith.”**

In the original, the word **“his”** (that is, the prophet's faith) is not present. I think that what Paul means to say is that whatever prophesying (i.e. - proclamation) is done, must be done in a way that dovetails with the truth of God as revealed in Scripture.

While we must remain open to listening with a discerning ear to prophetic utterances (Paul explicitly tells us to *not* despise prophetic utterances - 1 Thessalonians 5:20!), I believe that the prophecy in view in Romans 12 is a proclamation of the word of God as revealed in Scripture.

And, to those who exercise the ministry of prophecy in the church, Paul says, *“Beware, lest you contradict the fundamental doctrine of “the faith” when you proclaim God's truth!”* *“Beware, lest you add something of your own that is nothing more than a personal hobby horse and not supported by Scripture.”* *“Beware, lest you withhold some truth that your hearers desperately need to hear.”*

The proclamation is to be zealous AND it is to align itself with God's truth - or it is to be ignored.

Here in Romans 12, Paul goes on to speak of six more gifts. They are divisible into two groups of three. The first trio begins with a word to those who serve.

Three Spheres of Gifted Ministry

Servants - Serve!

The word “service” (Greek *diakonia*) is used throughout the New Testament in a general way to refer to service rendered to God or to the church or to individuals.

The word comes from the same root as the word for “deacon.” Here, Paul evidently had in mind someone who had received from God a particular capacity for practical service. That person was to give himself or herself wholeheartedly to fulfill the tasks his servant’s heart led him to perform.

Does this need to be “stained glass”, inside-the-four-walls-of-the-church service? Must it be service on a church committee? NO!

Of course it can be. But it definitely need not be. The only requirement for the one who fulfills his or her ministry of “service” is that their “service” be practical, “hands-on”, real help (perhaps particularly to the needy and the poor) - in whatever context and arena of life - in Jesus’ Name.

It could be help with baby-sitting or plumbing, auto repair or dishwasher fixes.

It can involve yardwork for the infirm or helping pick up litter after a worship service. The possibilities are literally limitless for the one who would exercise the spiritual gift of service.

The one who has the gift of service should exercise that gift in the act of serving. The second of the first trio of gifts emphasizes the person who is exercising another gift.

Teachers - Teach!

Just as the one who prophesies is to exercise his gift in the proclamation of God’s truth and the servant is to exercise his gift in his serving, so the teacher is to exercise his or her giftedness in the arena in which or she has been gifted by the Spirit - and teach.

What is in view here is not so much proclamation as explanation.

It happens every week in our Sunday Schools as men and women teach the truth of the Bible to adults and three year olds and every age in between.

It happens during Men’s Bible studies, and Ladies’ Bible studies, Vacation Bible School, and Youth Group studies, and Care Groups.

I praise God for the many devoted men and women who exercise teaching gifts here at Northwest and who explain the riches of the Bible to young and old alike.

The ministry of the Word, carried out in the form of a systematic teaching of Christian truth is a vital part of a properly functioning body of believers.

The last of the first trio of “gifts” Paul mentions in Romans 12 is that of exhortation.

Exhorters - Exhort!

Whereas teaching is primarily aimed at the mind for the sake of understanding, exhortation is directed at the will and the conscience for the purpose of effecting change.

The eyes of the exhorter are to be firmly fixed not only on the gospel, but also on the concrete situation of the hearers. That is because exhortation is the application of biblical truth to a particular situation.

The word we translate “exhortation” is a rich Greek word (*parakaleo*) that literally means “to call alongside to help.”

It is the root word for a descriptive title of the Holy Spirit in John 16 (transliterated “*paracletos*”), where the Spirit is said to be the One who comes alongside believers to help in Jesus’ physical absence.

The ministry of the exhorter is multi-faceted. It can be aimed at consoling those who are afflicted, unsettling those who are rebellious, or encouraging those who are demoralized.

In this first trio of gifts, *servicing*, *teaching*, and *exhortation* indicate the *spheres* in which these ministries are to be carried out.

The final three gifts are mentioned with descriptive adjectives, defining the *spirit* in which they are to be exercised.

Three “Spirits” of Gifted Ministry

Give with liberality!

Paul says, “**he who gives**” is to give “**with liberality.**” Here is a reference to the person who is especially gifted by God to imitate the giving nature of God. He or she gives of their own substance to meet the needs of others and to further the purposes of God.

This might be a reference to a person who is charged with the distribution of the property of the church to the needy. But, probably the one in view distributes that which is his/her own to the needy.

And how is the giver to give? With liberality! To give liberally means that we give freely, not constrained by guilt or greed or pride.

To give as Paul describes here is to give for the sheer joy of advancing Christ’s kingdom, for the delight of storing up treasure in Heaven, and for the satisfaction of meeting needs in Jesus’ Name.

The one in view in the next phrase, “**he who leads, with diligence**” is the one who gives oversight and direction to a Jesus-centered ministry.

Lead with diligence!

Those who have responsibilities for kingdom leadership should lead in a certain way. Specifically, they should lead with diligence (literally, “haste” as if they were going somewhere!). When you read this phrase, the word ZEAL may come to mind.

Paul’s listing of gifts ends with a word about those who show mercy.

Show mercy with cheerfulness!!

Here are people who have a special capacity for showing mercy to those in special need. People who need mercy may need it for a variety of reasons.

They may be in distressing situations. Or, they may have fallen into terrible rebellion, have repented, and need to be forgiven.

Paul says that the one who shows mercy to a hurting or repentant fellow Christian should do so with cheerfulness. Why would he say this?

Well, anyone who has ever been in need of help knows that it is possible to be “helped” by someone else in such a hard and cold way that you, the help-ee, wish the help-er would just go away!

It is possible to forgive in such a way, by adding contempt and criticism, that the forgiveness is an insult. There is a way of forgiving a man that pushes him further into despair.

On the other hand, there is a way of forgiving and helping that lifts the fallen out of the mire. That would be to show mercy cheerfully. When someone does that, hurting hearts are blessed.