

## On Humility and Unity

### Romans 12:3-8

March 8, 2020  
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Today, God's Word comes to our favorite subject—ourselves! Specifically, how we think about ourselves inwardly. Our inward self-talk. I have a friend who wrote a whole book about self-talk particularly for women. You know, those conversations we have inwardly. Self-thoughts: *I'm amazing* or *I'm a loser*. Self-evaluations: *I'm better than most people* or *I'm so much worse than most people*. Sometimes self-condemnation, but frankly, our tendency is to see ourselves better than we are and to see others worse than they are.

Is this heightened sense of self-importance where the gospel should take us? Paul will show that the gospel gets me out of myself to see myself as God sees me. This humbles me to see others the way God sees them, which elevates their significance and should motivate me to love them and serve them. Here is how Paul says it as we continue our series in Romans.

*"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, "so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."* (Romans 12:3-5 ESV)

As we have seen, Paul transitions from explaining the gospel in chapters 1-11 to applying the gospel in chapters 12-16. Chapter 12 could be entitled, "Everyday Christianity" or "This is What it Looks Like, Folks." Renewed mind. Delighting in God's will. And today is a sober self-assessment motivating serving Jesus by serving his people. *"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think."* (Romans 12:3)

*"For by the grace given to me."* It's always disarming when someone starts off a conversation with their own failures and need for grace. Here, the eminent Apostle Paul notes that he is a recipient of God's grace. He needed grace. He is an apostle by God's grace. Grace reminds us of who we really are—sinners. Grace puts us in our place, which I think is why Paul leads with it. *For by the grace given to me (and, ahem, given to you as well), don't think too highly of yourselves.*

There is a clear play on words here in the text. If you like dad jokes and puns, this verse is for you. Paul is working this word "think." The verse is cleverly built around four different uses of this word. First, *don't think too highly*. This is a Greek combo word, literally "hyper-think" or "super-think." Don't get hyper about yourself. Don't think you are so super.

*Hyper-think* is another word for "pride; self-elevation; self-obsession; self-worship." This is the root of all sin and our great struggle even after salvation. We still think too highly of ourselves. So what is the solution? Feigned self-debasement? Telling ourselves constantly how horrible we are? Paul is aiming at our self-thinking. Carrying the theme of a renewed mind from Romans 12:2, why doesn't he say, *don't brag on yourself or belittle others*? Because those are the fruits of a pernicious root issue; how we think about ourselves.

## The Self-Elevator

This is what we typically associate with arrogance or haughtiness. We say it this way, *he has a high view of himself. He has a big head. Dude's got an ego.* What are we saying? We are saying that the impression we get is that inside his heart he has elevated himself too high in importance or giftedness or significance.

Using that elevator as an illustration, if I'm a 4<sup>th</sup> floor intellect and a 6<sup>th</sup> floor friend with 2<sup>nd</sup> floor gifting, human pride is constantly seeing myself on a higher floor. Ever have that confusion? You think it's floor 5 but you walk out to discover it's floor 3. Oops. *I deserve a much higher place, significance, appreciation, etc.* For this sort of person, their mental elevator only has an up button. No down button.

This is the Pharisee in Jesus' story, who in prayer, looks around the temple and says, *Dear God, I'm glad I'm not like other men, like this tax collector over here.* (Luke 18:9-14) What do you see as you look around the church? Inferiors? Less-than-you types? Are you in the up elevator?

The other side of this is less obvious, but equally dangerous.

## The Self-Deprecator

We tend to only associate pride with haughtiness, but pride is much more devious including constant self-condemnation. This is the person who wants everyone to know how humble they are. They relish the chance to talk about their failures. Their shortcomings. They are pitiful and rather enjoy the pity given to them.

I remember growing up watching *The Brady Bunch*. In one episode, the middle son Peter hosted a party for his friends. He had the hots for one particular girl and was desperate for her attention. So, he sat on the steps by himself at his own party till she came over and asked, *what's wrong?* He said, *I'm not good at anything.... Oh Peter, yes you are! You're amazing!* She showed him great pity and Peter rather enjoyed it.

Pity is pride fishing for a compliment or an affirmation of worth. These people are nobodies and they want everyone to know just what a nobody they are.

As Jonathan Edwards has pointed out, when this man considers how humble he is when compared to his proper place of dignity, he admires his humility.<sup>1</sup> If you want to know if the self-deprecator is actually humble, when he tells you how insignificant he is, just agree with him. *Yep, you really are a nobody.* If he's offended, you've exposed him.

But this is the slippery nature of pride. It can be an elevator with only an up button, but it can also be an elevator with only a down button. Paul, what should we do? *"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."* (Romans 12:3) Don't overestimate, don't underestimate. Rather, think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith God has assigned. Be realistic. Be sensible.

"According to the measure of faith" is a debated phrase. What does *faith* mean? What does *measure* mean? I don't think it's saving faith because God gives that to us all in the same

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<sup>1</sup> See Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p. 333.

measure. I take this to mean that we should look at how God made us, wired us, and gifted us and evaluate ourselves by how God made us. God's gifts are God's will. In a few verses he is going to talk about spiritual gifts and serving others. All of us are gifted by God to serve in different ways and on different scales.

To use the parable of the talents, not everybody is a ten-talent person. God didn't intend the five-talent guy to make ten talents; he praised him for maximizing his five talents. There was a different measure of grace given.

How helpful this can be when we realize God doesn't grade all of us on the same curve! When I read about great pastors and theologians of the past, I think, *how did they do it? I can't do that.* Down goes my elevator. God only expects us to do the best we can with what he has measured out to us. We need to be realistic about that, neither overestimating nor underestimating. Frankly, I see a lot of underestimating in our church. We will approach people about an opportunity or gift we see in them, and they will often say, *Oh no, I could never do that. I'm not up to that. I don't have the experience for that. Surely somebody else would be better, etc.* We have approached you because we see potential in you.

*"If we consider ourselves to possess gifts we do not have, then we have an inflated notion of our place and function; we sin by esteeming ourselves beyond what we are. But if we underestimate, then we are refusing to acknowledge God's grace and we fail to exercise that which God has dispensed for our own sanctification and that of others."<sup>2</sup>*

How can we know? Next week we'll unpack the categories Paul is talking about in verses 6 and following about spiritual gifts.

## **Finding My Significance in Christ and My Purpose in the Church**

Notice how Paul sees a healthy self-assessment: *"For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."* (Romans 12:4) What does a healthy self-assessment do? It moves us away from the morbid introspection and personal navel gazing that leads to isolation. In a sense, it takes our thoughts off ourselves entirely and places them on the opportunities to serve other people, especially brothers and sisters in Christ.

The analogy Paul uses is very familiar but don't let the familiarity keep you from hearing what he's saying. He compares a healthy self-identity to a part of the human body. He calls them "members." We don't refer to our hand or foot as a member; think body part. Our bodies have an incredible assortment of parts and organs, all of which fulfill a dizzying array of functions, the vast majority of which we are completely unaware. The heart is pumping and the kidney is filtering, and the immune system is protecting and the intestines are conveying and the optical nerve is transmitting, etc. The human body is a masterpiece of interlocking parts functioning in complete harmony from the cellular to the pulmonary to the electrical. It is a perfect illustration of diversity of function and complete unity of purpose and objective.

What happens if just one body part ceases to see its role as important and goes rogue? Begins to think it's really not that important or is jealous that it's not a different body part? This is the point of a parallel passage in 1 Corinthians 12 where he envisions the eye saying to the hand, *I don't need you* or the head saying to the feet, *I don't need you!* All of a

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<sup>2</sup> John Murray, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Romans*, p. 117.

sudden, the eye realizes how important the hand is and the head how important the foot is. We have all pulled some muscle or had some unknown body part stop working properly and all of a sudden we realize how important it is! His point? *"So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."* (Romans 12:5)

He transitions from the illustration to the reality. The illustration of the human body's parts shows how each of us are to find our place and significance in the context of belonging and serving in the spiritual body of Christ that is the church. It is the church universal and the church local. Bethel Church is the body of Christ, but then so is every other gospel-preaching church in Northwest Indiana and around the world.

How are we united? *"So we, though many, are one body in Christ."* (Romans 12:5) The tremendous diversity is brought into unity in Christ. We have learned in Romans that "in Christ" is theological shorthand for *union with Christ*; this great doctrine of salvation whereby God through faith unites us with the saving works of Jesus in his death (for our sin), burial, and resurrection. Our union with Jesus is an ongoing reality. It means many things, but one big one is that not only am I united with Jesus, I am also united with everyone else that's united with Jesus.

### **Unity in Christ: The Outward Expression of the Eternal Reality**

We don't create unity, Jesus did that on the cross. We are called to display unity and that is a matter of how we love and serve others. This is a huge point throughout Scripture regarding true religion—authentic Christianity.

- *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* (John 13:34–35)
- *"If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."* (1 John 4:20)

Jesus powerfully prays in his high priestly prayer in John 13 for us to display the oneness that Jesus has with the Father. That's an amazing prayer when we consider the eternal trinitarian unity between the Father and the Son.

*"When we gather in a local congregation, we are to realize that we belong together. We are not simply a group of like-minded people who meet together in a similar fashion to members of some club or guild. We have been united by the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit to the body of Christ. As such we are not only in living union with the Head but in organic union with each other..."<sup>3</sup>*

What is the connection between not thinking too highly of yourself in verse 3 and the call to identity in the body of Christ? A healthy self-understanding finds my identity and significance in Christ as I serve Christ's church. That's where he's going with spiritual gifts in verse 6 and following.

Think of the analogy of the body. When is a thumb the happiest? *God, I'm glad I'm not like these other fingers, like that pinkie tax collector over there. I provide the grip. I provide the*

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert M. Carson, *Hallelujah!: Christian Worship*, p. 42ff.

*hold. Without me these fingers would be largely useless. Therefore I'm really underappreciated*

OR

*I'm no good. I never get to wear the rings like the other fingers. I oscillate, but I wish I just went forward and backward like the other fingers. I'm not close to the others; perhaps they don't like me. I guess I'm not that important...*

A thumb that thinks like that is a miserable thumb and the fingers are glad he's over there by himself because they can't take his arrogance, or they can't take his pity party.

When is a thumb happy? It's happy when it sees itself as a small but important part of the hand. When it works in harmony with the fingers, it can fix a meal and play Beethoven and hold a child and signal everything's great. A thumb is happy when it neither thinks more or less of itself, but thinks about itself less. That is a great definition of humility taken from Rick Warren, "*Humility isn't thinking less of ourselves, it's thinking of yourself less.*"<sup>4</sup>

Is it no wonder so many of us are unhappy? We are thinking constantly of ourselves and wallowing in either overestimation or underestimation of our place in this world. Jesus calls us out of our self-obsession and puts us in a context where the opportunities to think about other people's needs and actually meet those needs is everywhere. Listen to this description by a secular second-century philosopher named Aristides, describing healthy everyday Christianity:

*"They abstain from all impurity, in the hope of the recompense that is to come in another world. As for their servants or handmaids or children, they persuade them to become Christians by the love they have for them; and when they have become so, they call them without distinction, 'brothers.' They do not worship strange gods and they walk in all kindness and humility and falsehood is not found among them. And they love one another. When they see the stranger, they bring him to their homes and rejoice over him as over a true brother, but they do not call brothers those who are after the flesh, but those who are in the Spirit and in God."*<sup>5</sup>

What could you say about that? It's almost like they belonged to each other. It's like they see other people as more significant than themselves. It looks like people for whom the gospel has shaped how they see themselves and how they perceive others. It created a beautiful harmony of happy Christians united together in Christ.

That's the vision God has for Bethel Church. Humble and happy people united in Christ serving one another. How God gifts us is next week. What are spiritual gifts? What's mine? How can I use it for God's glory and my good? See you next week.

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<sup>4</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, page unknown.

<sup>5</sup> Aristides, as quoted by John MacArthur, *Body Dynamic*, p. 7.