

Prayer

Lord Jesus, come gently, we pray, when life is difficult. Bring a word, a touch, a sense of Your presence, and by Your love and compassion place within us the seeds of hope and renewal. Then, with every day that passes, may we increasingly know the transforming power of the Holy Spirit working deep within. Then lift our hearts to praise Your name, we pray, for ever more. Thank You Lord Jesus; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Whenever you have a break for a cup of tea or coffee today, tell the Lord what is on your mind. The more instantaneous the response the more truthful it is likely to be!

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian who live under oppression:** *Pray for Christians who live under oppression in their own homes, especially those who have to keep their personal faith a secret from those they love*
- *Give thanks to God for the beauty of life and the many good things you enjoy in life*
- *Pray about the subject of nuclear arms, and pray for those who make them as well as those who deploy them and have authority over them*

Meditation

In Jesus Christ, we have a King;
One who taught with commanding authority,
Who healed and cast out demons with a word.

In Jesus Christ, we have a Servant;
One who gave Himself completely for everyone,
And submitted even His life to the Father's will.

In Jesus Christ, we have a Friend;
One who felt the feelings of those around Him,
Who cared for them, whatever their background.

In Jesus Christ we have our God ;
One who said 'I Am ...' and proved His Father's love
In word and deed and by giving us His life.

In Jesus Christ, we find a King, a Servant, a Friend, and God;
One who reveals the truth about His Father
And One who came to earth to save our souls.

Bible passage - Romans 12:3-8

³ For I say to everyone, by the grace give to me, that none of you should think more highly of yourself than is appropriate, but think of yourself with moderation, for God has granted each of you a measure of faith.

⁴ For just as one body has many parts but they do not all have the same purpose, ⁵ so in Christ, we who are many are one body, we are individuals who belong to each other. ⁶ We also have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: preaching in proportion to our faith, ⁷ ministry in practical service, the teacher in giving instruction; ⁸ the encourager in giving help; the giver in generosity; the manager in eager service, the merciful in cheerfulness.

Bible Study

Review

These words of Paul have proved to be of great importance to God's people for many years. They stand at the beginning of his description here in Romans of how the Christian should put faith into practice, and they highlight two key themes. Firstly that of personal humility and moderation, and secondly, that of unity and diversity in the body of Christ. Although Paul does not use the phrase 'the body of Christ' when speaking about the church here, this is what we must presume. He describes the church as like a body with many parts (12:4), which finds its unity 'in Christ' (12:5).

This passage begins with an appeal by Paul for humility and moderation amongst God's people. Christ is the yardstick for all Christian behaviour, and all must stand before His extraordinary humility, as described by Paul in his letter to the Philippians. Christ's humility has achieved our salvation and peace with God, so whatever our personal characteristics, our work for Christ must echo the humility of the Saviour:

Though He was in the form of God, He did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

Humility is perhaps easy for some and difficult for others, but the injunction of scripture remains that we behave and act with humility. In particular, this strong charge comes in a passage of scripture that speaks of the very individual way in which God grants gifts, so we would be wise to make sure that we use all of our gifts and graces with this same humility. We can hardly be brash in our exercise of the gifts of the Spirit when Christ has died so that we may have them.

Today, most Christians refer to this passage as one of the lists of 'gifts of the Spirit' (12:6-8), alongside that found in 1 Corinthians 12 (vv.4-12) and Ephesians 4 (v.11). This list is not called the 'gifts of the Spirit', however, because Paul says they are given '*according to the grace given ...*' (12:6), and they may be better described as 'gifts of service given by God's grace'. Of course, these gifts are indeed spiritual just like all the gifts of God, and they may be numbered alongside all the other lists of gifts given by God. In our enthusiasm to find a complete list of spiritual gifts, we should not forget to study these ones for what they are, not for what we want them to be.

Paul's points about the gifts of God are simple yet profound. God's people are all different, and even though there are different gifts such as preaching and teaching, each gift is diversified further by the fact that each person uses their gifts differently, or as Paul says '*according to the grace given us*' (12:6). This is not a picture of uniformity but one of endless variety and complexity! Yet those who exercise these gifts are '*one body ... in Christ*' (12:5), and although Paul does not stress the point as he does in 1 Corinthians, the unity in Christ is certainly not symbolic or spiritual it is practical. The body must surely work together as one; it is '*one body*' (12:4) and within the body, all '*belong to each other*' (12:5).

In the previous chapter of Romans, Paul dealt with the thorny issue of the future of God's rebellious people, Israel. For most of the Old Testament they had failed to live in unity, being separate nations for much of the time, divided between north (Israel) and south (Judah). This compromised their mission to the world, and their example tells us that disunity amongst God's people will always disadvantage God's work.

In this way, Paul opens the eyes of his readers to the limitless possibilities of God's grace. The list invites Christians to consider firstly, the full potential of God's people when they use their gifts and talents together in service, and secondly, the importance of every member of the Church in the fulfilment of its mission, even those with the same 'gifts'! Together, the whole passage invites the Christian to be aware of the gracious gifts of God which help the church deliver its mission to present Jesus Christ to the world. God's gifts are always given for a purpose!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The unity of God's people
- The diversity of God's people

Going Deeper

We will now look at some of the verses and phrases within this passage which illustrate its theme of unity and diversity in Christian living. This is not a straightforward passage, and in places, what Paul says about faith, grace and gifts, is not what we may have thought. Nevertheless, what Paul says is entirely consistent within the passage and in its place within the whole letter to the Romans.

The unity of God's people (vv3-5)

It is very easy to talk about the unity of God's people as being in Jesus Christ, but very hard to find any real examples today of how this is consistently demonstrated to the world! In Paul's day, the divisions between Christians were between Jew and Gentile (see Romans 9-11) but also between different factions that were emerging in the churches based upon the characteristics and gifts of the great early leaders. Paul describes this well in the first few chapters of 1 Corinthians. Emerging in Paul's day were other divisions, which concerned different beliefs about Jesus Christ. His letter to the Colossians, for example, was directed against people within the church who were teaching that Christianity was some kind of 'mystery religion' based upon secret knowledge (see Col 2:8f.).

It is against this entire background of contention within the church that Paul says for our benefit, 'none of you should think more highly of yourself than is appropriate' (12:3). There is a natural but sinful human tendency within all people to have influence over others, and create a hierarchy of power. There are few, if any examples of human societies, which do not display this tendency. It is Paul's argument that someone who has been made anew by Jesus Christ has no need to seek superiority over anyone else or to dominate them in any way. All power is Christ's, and we find our identity in Him, so the way in which we think of ourselves must be defined by Christ, not by any worldly comparative measure of human ability, status, or intellect, for example.

But in saying this, Paul does not imply that we are all the same. Far from it, we each have different gifts and graces; it is just that their value lies in their value to God, not in other people's perception of them. He says that 'God has granted each of you a measure of faith'. This phrase has caused some concern every since it was written, for surely Paul has already written to explain that there is one faith in Jesus Christ by which we are saved (chps 3-6). What Paul seems to be saying here is that whilst 'faith' is indeed one thing in Christ, it is found in each of us in unique ways, according to our individuality. Out of this passage of Scripture has arisen a historic understanding of 'general' faith, which is that faith we all need to trust in Christ and so be saved, but also 'special' faith which God grants us according to our individuality and the circumstances of our lives. It is rather like saying that whilst (almost) everyone can drive a car, everyone drives differently!

Paul has a different example, of course, which is of a 'body'. In this passage, he does not use the well known phrase 'body of Christ', but he says 'we are all part of one body in Christ'. If you read the different letters of Paul, he talks about the 'body' of Christ in different ways, and some people believe this is because of Paul's own growing and changing ideas about this picture of Christ as a 'body'. I suggest it is an illustration he uses differently and for different purposes. Here, he says that the church is one body 'in' Christ to emphasise the unity of God's people 'in' Him. Neither should any interest in this distract us from Paul's important conclusion in this passage, which is that we, though different individuals bearing different 'measures' of faith, 'are therefore individuals who belong to each other' (12:5). Some translations are less specific here, for example 'individually we are members one of another.' (NRSV) Let us be quite specific here. The Methodist who worships at one end of a city street 'belongs to' the Pentecostal who worships at Zion down at the other end, and vice-versa (and every other combination of Christian church and organisation you can imagine). Not many of us live as if this text of God's Word had anything to do with us at all!

The diversity of God's people, and the 'gifts'

Now if we all have different 'faith' granted to us by God (12:3), it is fairly obvious that we will 'have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us' (12:6). The gifts that are listed in this passage are linked to those in 1 Corinthians 12 and also Ephesians 4 because they are all described by the same Greek word for 'gift', which is 'charismata'. All the gifts in this list apart from the first one which is 'prophecy', are gifts of service which read more like natural abilities than special 'godly' gifts. In 1 Corinthians, it is exciting to read about 'tongues', 'healing', 'discernment' etc. and wonder what they can all mean, given that no one of us, according to Scripture's own words, can claim them all!

Firstly, we will look at the gift of prophecy. The word 'prophet' is used throughout Scripture to refer to those who deliver God's message, and in the New Testament it is a designation that is therefore applied to all who preach within the church, for each preacher delivers 'God's Word'. It stands at the head of Paul's list, because although we might think of this as a very 'spiritual' gift, more at home in the Corinthian list, as far as Paul was concerned, it was the primary task of the church, and in some way represented all the others. It is interesting that in 1 Corinthians, it is possible that Paul regarded prophecy as having some degree of priority over the other gifts (depending upon how you interpret the end of 1 Corinthians 12:28 and 1 Cor. 14:1). Certainly, if we think of prophecy in our passage as representing the essential gift of preaching the Gospel,

then the phrase which follows it 'according to the proportion of our faith' makes sense, for someone can only preach what God has placed in them to preach.

Each of the remaining gifts mentioned; service, teaching, encouragement, giving, leading, and showing mercy, are all quite natural gifts that we might consider as arising within the normal talents we might expect to find within any group of people who make up a church. Now, in 1 Corinthians, it is quite clear that the gifts are specially given by the Spirit for the 'common good' (1 Cor 12:7). Here, however, Paul appears to emphasise that all these gifts do in fact arise naturally, but they are elevated to being special 'gifts' not in this case by the Holy Spirit (who is not mentioned), but 'according to the grace given to us' by God (12:6). As each gift is announced, it is named and then described, sometimes using the exact same word. The process is that God takes a natural gift or talent and blesses it by His grace so that it may be used effectively within the life of the church.

Some of the gifts mentioned are straightforward; teaching, or showing mercy, for example. The second gift is service, which means the helping of others, and this is the Greek word which lies behind what we mean by 'ministry', which contains the idea of serving God by serving others. The fourth is 'encouragement', otherwise translated as 'urging' or 'exhorting'; it should certainly not be seen as an easy gift, because it requires tenacity and a positive outlook on life. The sixth gift is translated variously as 'leadership', 'being over others', 'being in charge', but there may be a good argument for saying that this means 'management', or what some people would call 'administration'. Nevertheless, it is to be done with diligent enthusiasm, or 'zeal'.

Application

These words of Paul are very important for the church. Remember, Paul was trying to describe what should be distinctive about the life of God's New People, the Church, and he clearly said that it should be unified in Jesus, but also distinctive in combining all God's different people according to their gifts and graces. No-one, whatever their gifts or whoever they are, should feel out of place in God's church.

Because this is the main theme of this passage, it is important to say that the list of gifts given by Paul is surely representative. Whilst it is necessary to have people exhibiting most of these gifts within the church, we should expect as many more as there are members of the church! Also, if the nature of a gift possessed by two members of the church is the same, then the measure of the grace by which they are exhibited will be different, because the two people concerned will be different! For this reason, this list is a guide which helps people in the church address the issues of gifts of ministry (but not the unique and individual 'spiritual' gifts of the Holy Spirit as in 1 Corinthians), but I stress that the list in Scripture gives us the starting point for our understanding of them, not a definition of them. Today, we should at least add the ministry gift of music, for example!

But the other side of Paul's coin must also be continually emphasised, particularly in a world in which individualism is so rife. We are individuals in Christ so that we might 'belong to each other' (12:5), and unless we face the challenge of applying the gracious gifts God has given to us in a way which serves Christ and His Church, then we are too influenced by the world, and not the Gospel. There are too many people trying to climb ladders in our churches today, and living according to their own agendas and not that of Christ. However, we will certainly become distinct within the world if we follow Paul's advice and live for each other, in the name of Jesus.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How can a church in any one place demonstrate that it shares unity in Christ with all other Christians?
2. Discuss in your house group what you think is meant by the phrase 'measure of faith' in verse 3.
3. Should we feel free to add to Paul's gifts of service in this passage? If so, what important gifts should be added?

Personal comments by author

This is a remarkable passage of scripture, and the gifts mentioned here are profoundly important. Each of them tells us something about the nature of Christian service, and all of them are important even to this day.

It would be good for any church to look at this list and ensure that they are reflected within the 'body' of the church community. Certainly, it would be difficult to operate without them.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Perhaps the best way is to try to identify with other Christians in other churches and other places who have similar interests and concerns, indeed, other 'gifts' and graces. For many people, this is the most practical way of expressing this unity in Christ.*
 - *Write a list of the churches making up the 'body of Christ' where you live, adding what you know about them. Visit them if necessary or look up their websites.*
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Final Prayer

We thank You, Lord Jesus Christ, for standing with us through the work of this day. Your presence has made all the difference in the world and we could not do what we have done without You. Thank You for being there for us. AMEN
