

All Roads Lead Here: Fitting In
By Jason Huff
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2 Chronicles 7:14; John 17:20-26; Romans 12:3-8

Today's final Scripture reading comes from Romans 12:3-8. This is God's holy and inerrant Word to us today and always. "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 measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully."

When my mom lived with us last summer and fall, we started a gigantic puzzle – 1000 pieces. It included maybe 30 different pictures from Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Now I've done difficult puzzles in my day and so has my mom, but we just couldn't finish it. We tried and tried, but the pieces were tiny, they didn't seem to go together like we thought, and then there was the cat. We'd think we'd have a section together and then, in the night, bat bat bat, those pieces were on the floor in the morning. Eventually, it all went back into the box.

Life often seems like a puzzle where we are trying to figure out where we fit. I still get a nasty feeling in the pit of my stomach thinking back to middle school and knowing I didn't fit. That doesn't always change as we get older. We try to figure out how we fit with our families, co-workers, and friends. For some of us, social things come easy. For others of us, not so much.

For many adults, finding a church that fits is hard too. Sometimes that's on us; we want a church that tells us what we want to hear, so we leave feeling good about ourselves, rather than a church that tells us what we need to hear so we leave feeling good about God. If we come to church just for what we get out of it, eventually we won't fit when the church doesn't provide us what we want. But even for those of us who are really Christ's disciples, we still have to figure out our role in the local church. What's our place? How do we fit?

Today's passage gets to the heart of those questions. The past eleven chapters taught us how we fit into the grand scheme of God's plan, how Christ has saved us from our sinfulness. We know we fit into God's family as His adopted children. Now we're to the practical side. Just as we have different responsibilities and chores and roles at home, we have them in God's family. Today's passage encourages us to use the gifts God has given us to bless His family.

Let's start at the beginning: "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you." Paul isn't passing along his own ideas for the church. He speaks by the grace given him by God, the grace that made him an apostle after once hunting down Christians. When he calls us to think about ourselves rightly, he speaks out of his own experience. Despite Paul's impressive deeds as a Pharisee and as an apostle, he appeals to God's grace and not his resume.

And here's the rule he wants us to follow: "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you." This falls in line with everything the New Testament teaches about self-esteem. We are told in 2 Corinthians that boasting in our weaknesses highlights Christ's strength in us. Paul calls himself "nothing" in that same book, highlighting that everything he is comes from God.

Our culture teaches our children to have self-esteem, which is funny because as the self-esteem movement has grown, so have anxiety disorders among youth. It's because that self-esteem isn't based on anything we've earned. Recently, an international test measured both students' self-esteem and their academic achievement in first-world countries. What was odd was that South Korean students had the lowest personal self-esteem but the highest academic achievement. American students had the lowest academic achievement but the highest self-esteem. Both sets of students didn't have the right judgment about themselves and their abilities.

Why does this matter to the church? Well, there are a couple of things. First, when you think too highly of yourself, you rarely serve because it seems beneath you. Many of us watched *Downton Abbey*, and it showed a certain part of British life that existed for centuries. The people "downstairs" served the people "upstairs." Truth was, the servants and the aristocracy were very much the same – some of them were moral, some selfish, some cruel. The thing that separated "upstairs" and "downstairs" was money and a certain level of education and poise bought with money. Yet even when the family who watched over their village threw a celebration for the town, they weren't serving – their servants doing the work. It was below their status.

Now none of us here is part of the British aristocracy, I don't think! But we sometimes consider certain work beneath us because of our high view of ourselves. Those views often keep us from doing the grunt work. Why should the pastor with a graduate degree set up chairs and clean the bathrooms? Well, if I have too high a view of myself, that's going to be my question. But the car mechanic or the line worker might say the same thing. If we have too high a view of ourselves, we see some things as beneath us.

That's why we need to have to have sober judgment. God has saved us from ourselves, from sin and death and hell. For that to happen, our Savior willingly suffered a humiliating, undignified death, hanging bleeding and naked on a cross for nine hours for our sakes. He was the One through whom the universe was made, the One for whom the universe was made, but nothing was beneath Him to save us. We need to think clearly – if we are not above our master Jesus, then no job on behalf of the Kingdom is beneath us.

Elisabeth Elliot was the wife of a very famous missionary who died trying to reach the natives of Ecuador with the message of Jesus. She described the right outlook like this: "This job has been given to me to do. Therefore, it is a gift. Therefore, it is a privilege. Therefore, it is an offering I may make to God. Therefore, it is to be done gladly, if it is done for Him. Here, not somewhere else, I may learn God's way. In this job, not in some other, God looks for faithfulness."

The other reason we need to have sober judgment and not a higher view of ourselves than we should is that sober judgment rightly judges the skills we genuinely have. We want certain gifts and sometimes convince ourselves we are good at them, even though we aren't actually skilled in them. I was amazed and shocked to learn that my dad was once part of a church choir. I was amazed and shocked because if my dad sang in the shower, the tiles started falling off the walls. He was completely and totally tone deaf. As it turned out, he was kicked out – not because he didn't try, but because he was terrible.

And that was OK, because you know what my dad was really good at? Cooking. He was a masterful chef. He made some foods so well like lasagna and Swedish meatballs that I've never had their equal, even when other people use his recipes. He was happiest when he was in the church kitchen cooking for an event. If he hadn't been gently ushered out of the choir loft and into the kitchen, what a loss for the church that would have been!

Unfortunately, in the average church, many people fill roles because there's an open spot, not because they have been gifted by God for them. We want to be a help, and we think, "I can do this job because I'm capable at Y and Z." But that leads to frustration and disillusionment. But if we have sober judgment about the gifts God has given us, we'll do what God has gifted us to do, not the position that needs a warm body. Some jobs, like filling grocery bags, almost everyone can do. But major roles in the church require gifts. That's where Paul goes next.

He writes, "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us." A few key things to think about here...first, *we as the church are the body of Christ locally and globally.*

We are united to Christians around the world, and we should always have in heart and mind fellow believers everywhere, including in other local churches. We belong to each other in the global church, which means that we are concerned about believers suffering everywhere, whether in North Korea or China or Puerto Rico.

However, we also need to think locally, specifically about CrossWay, as our church home where God has placed us. Bluntly, we need each other, especially in a small church like CrossWay where we have 12 regular families. Some bigger churches, you can go in, never be noticed, never be needed, you listen to the sermon, you use their services, and never actually belong. Here, if you are a part of CrossWay, you belong to the group and we belong to you quickly. You matter to us. You are important. And if you are here, God has put you here specifically for His reasons, His plan, and His purpose at this time.

And before we even get into the unique gifts that God gives us, because we belong to each other, the first gift we give to each other is time together on Sundays. There's no doubt that Sunday afternoons are hard, and we're working hard on changing that. But we need each other's presence. There is nothing so hard for me as a pastor to preach to seven people, as we had one Sunday recently. It's discouraging. But there is nothing so encouraging as when folks are here.

To be fair, most Christians don't make church a priority, even ones whose theology is OK. The average "faithful" believer makes it to church 26 times a year. Most of you are better than average – don't you feel good about yourself now? But not only is 26 times a year not very faithful, as a small church, we don't have that luxury. We need to see one another each week because we count on each other's presence. Even if you don't have a particular gift to share that week, your gift of being there is huge. It encourages me; it encourages others.

But more than that, *God has given us special gifts given to us by His grace to use in the congregation.* You are needed here because we need your gifts. We need what it is that God has specifically gifted you with doing so we can fully accomplish what it is that God would have CrossWay be in our community. God has given you specific gifts meant for you to use to glorify Him. At a large church, you might be one of a hundred people with a gift; here, you might be the only one. You are important to the work of the Kingdom in a small church.

So let's take a look at the ones Paul mentions here. First one: prophesy. This is the gift where God gives a person specific insight into His plans and purposes. The ancient prophets warned against disobedience to God and told of God's plans to come. For the most part, prophecy was a first century gift – it may be given today at times, but it's been abused so much and used rightly so rarely that it's hard to take a prophecy at face value. But true prophecy always aligns itself with Scripture, with how God has revealed Himself in the past.

I would be reluctant to take the word of someone who says, "God told me to tell you." But if it lines up with Scripture and God's witness, pay attention. I went to Russia because my friend Mark had the sense from God that I was supposed to go with him, and I affirmed it through my own prayers and God's response to those prayers. Mark has never considered himself a prophet, but it shows that God does speak to His people today, and that never stops.

Serving is the next gift. While everyone is called to serve, this is the gift of taking care of the needs of the less fortunate, particularly in food and provisions. In the early church, there were so many poor and widows needing help that the people with teaching gifts had no time to teach. The role of deacon – which is the word here for serving – was devised to free up teachers to teach. Are you good at seeing people's needs and meeting them – not necessarily with your own money, but with the resources that are available? That's this gift.

Teaching is a gift. That's what I do. When I lead us through Scripture or a Bible study or help people understand how to lead or to be disciples, that's teaching. Teachers have the gift of taking difficult material and making it understandable to those in their care. This gift has to be nurtured; we need training to do it well. But it's a gift that God has given the church.

Encouragement is a gift. Boy, that's a gift we need, isn't it? And it's proof that God spreads His gifts around. When you need sound biblical advice or council, you come to me. But for practical service needs and encouragement, many of you text Catha. And that's good! Because while I have some gifting in those areas, Catha has great gifting in those. Some of you may, too. Encouragement is needed because we have lots of needs. And sometimes we don't need solutions; we need a listening ear. Encouragers provide that.

Next one Paul mentions: “if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously.” We ought to look at this carefully because we all have responsibilities to the gifts in small ways. Even if we aren’t teachers, we still teach our children what we can about God; we serve others in certain ways even if that’s not our big gift. We are all called to support the needs of others financially; God mentions the tithe as something for everyone. Yet sometimes we’re the ones in trouble! We’re the ones in need!

But God gives the gift of financial support to particular individuals. He gives them the means to help the church and its members not only to meet their needs but to accomplish God’s purposes. And unlike many of the other gifts, this one comes with a particular call – not just to give, but to give generously. If you have wealth, consider this carefully. God has given you resources for His purposes. As a Christian, all you own is His. Give thoughtfully and generously to what God places in your path.

Next job is leadership – again, with the responsibility to “govern diligently.” Leadership is one of those jobs where we joke that the best sign you have the gift for the job is that you don’t want it. Leadership is tough. Most of us think we want to lead because we really want the power that comes with leadership. But in Christ’s church, to lead is to serve, to be looking out for what God wants and not we want, for what is best for the whole and not just us as individuals. Leadership in the church is less about making decisions and more about prayerfully asking God what He would have us do. It’s always on a growth curve. But we need people gifted to lead, and who are willing to do it diligently – to show leadership through being a part of the life of the church even when it’s painful or boring or has conflict.

Last, “if [the gift] is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.” This is a little different from serving in that this is primarily to the downtrodden, the sick, the imprisoned – and if I can read something into it, those who are hard to love. The word in Greek is basically pity leading to compassion. That’s why there’s encouragement to do it cheerfully. This gift is to see those who are truly struggling and come alongside them in their pain, even when they’re miserable to be around. Tough work, but a good gifting.

Now there’s a lot here, enough that we’ve reached the end of our time and discussed the most basic ideas. But I don’t think they’re that hard to understand. And I don’t think that you have to leave this week with a deep burden to do something extravagant. Instead, what I would do is pray, something like this – “God, what gift have you given me to share with your people? And how might I best use that gift at CrossWay to glorify you? Once you let me know, give me the courage and strength to do it well, to the best of the ability you give me.” That’s your homework this week.

Friends, we are in this together. We are the body of Christ on this earth, now, to one another and those looking in. May we not think so highly of ourselves that we’re of no use to anyone else. Instead, may it be our prayer that God would gift us generously, and that we would use those gifts to His glory and our enjoyment of Him as His people.