July 10, 2022

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Romans 12:3-8

Laurie and I recently were talking and somehow the classic Disney movie *Snow White And The Seven Dwarves* came up. Laurie produced a trivia fact I had never heard before. In Walt Disney’s original script for the movie there weren’t 7 dwarves, there were 16 others who didn’t show up in the movie. They were deleted because it was decided their names weren’t appropriate. For instance, Tubby, Baldy, Deafy, Shorty and Burpy all were cut. Laurie challenged me to name the 7 dwarves. I did all right. I got 6 out of 7. I forgot Bashful. Still, 6 out of 7 is 86%, a solid B. This led to me nosing around on the Internet where I found a number of quizzes that purport to tell you which dwarf you would be. I took one of these quizzes and it told me I’m Doc, described this way, “You are a natural leader. You love to be in control, though sometimes you have no idea what you’re doing.” I don’t think I’m a natural leader and I do not love being in control. The only part of that I consider accurate is that often I have no idea what I’m doing. So I took a different dwarf quiz, and this one told me I’m Happy, described as bright and bubbly, the most social and friendly person among people I know. Well, that’s not right either. I don’t think people would call me bubbly. So I took a third dwarf quiz. This one was based on which foods you like best, which seems dubious. Yet this quiz came closest to actually nailing my personality. There was no description of the character of this dwarf, I suppose because it’s obvious. This quiz told me I most resemble Dopey. I’m pretty sure that’s right.

Why would I care what dwarf I’m like? They are all fictional characters in an animated kids’ film that’s nearly 90 years old. It turns out that people love quizzes like that. The reason is we have a fascination with trying to understand ourselves. Even late in life, we still are interested in trying to figure out who we are. Most of us go through life trying to get a better handle on who we are and what our place in this world is. We are never truly at peace and fulfilled until we have a solid grasp on those kinds of questions. Romans 12:3-8 teaches us some things about how we ought to think who we are and about our place in this world.

WE NEED TO THINK SOBERLY

There is a contrast in verse 3 between thinking more highly of ourselves than we should and having sober judgment. In the Greek text the contrast is seen in Paul’s use of two words that are derived from the same root. The words are *huperphroneo* and *sophroneo*. The root is the word *phroneo*, which means “to think.” The first one means to think beyond or over, thus to think too much of oneself. The second one means to think rationally or rightly. It means to judge ourselves without illusions. In other words, to have an accurate estimation of oneself.

God knows that we all think about our identity and our place in this world, so he gave some instruction on that. I recently read a quote from one very smart researcher who said that when our perceptions of ourselves and of reality are accurate we have a very good chance to be happy and fulfilled, but when our perceptions are not in line with reality we are sure to end up with great unhappiness and frustration.

John Nash was a Nobel Prize winning mathematician who struggled with schizophrenia. He was the subject of the movie *A Beautiful Mind*. Nash said, “Madness can be an escape. If things are not so good, you maybe want to imagine something better. In madness, I thought I was the most important person in the world.” His madness seemed better because it so elevated his importance, at least in his mind, but it did not produce peace and happiness. It produced chaos and pain because it wasn’t real.

How do we understand our place in the world? How do we know what we are worth? We must have a standard, some way of measuring that, and so we measure ourselves against other people. We gauge how smart they are, how talented they are, how attractive they are, how rich they are, how successful they are and we see how we measure up against them.

Our sports are all about comparing. Who is the fastest, the strongest, the most gifted? We compete against each other to find out. Students compare GPA’s, adults compare clothes, cars, careers, and much more. The comparing exists in every imaginable way and it has a terrible effect. Did you know that between 2007 and 2019 among adolescents in our country there was a 60% increase in the rates of depressive episodes requiring hospitalization and a 60% increase in suicides? Experts tell us there is a catastrophe going on among young people. What has caused this? It’s not one single thing. The breakdown of the family is a big contributor. But a huge factor is the explosion of the use of social media. Kids are going on Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook obsessively and comparing themselves with other kids, and it’s killing them. That’s what comparing does.

We all do it. I have never mastered the art of a beautiful lawn. It has irritated me that for 40 years I’ve never really been able to grow thick, green grass in our yard. In our back yard I gave up and we put in artificial turf. But we couldn’t do afford to do it in the front yard, so once again the pitiful grass out there is mocking me. There’s a man on our street who made his front yard his pride and joy. We’ve seen him out there on his hands and knees using scissors to trim his grass. But his grass has looked gorgeous. It was the best lawn in our neighborhood. But something has recently happened with this guy. I don’t know what’s going on. Maybe he’s become suddenly eco-conscious and is trying to conserve water. But his lawn looks terrible. When I drove by his house recently and noticed it was worse than ours I got an evil glee. It made me feel way too good. What is going on there? Comparison. We do it all the time.

Verse 3 says to have good judgment about who we are it needs to be “in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.” The question Paul addressed there is what is the metron, the meter, the standard we use to judge ourselves, to understand who we are? He says faith is the right standard. That sounds like he’s saying we can determine our identity, our place and value in the world by how much faith God has given us. But that is going to feed right into the comparison game. Who has the most faith and who has been given the best gifts? This is going to lead to all kinds of problems. It certainly did in Corinth where they competed on those kinds of issues. However, this is not what Paul meant.

Paul was not talking about subjective faith, as in “how much faith do you have?” He was talking about *the* faith, the body of objective truth that we believe. This is the faith God has given to each one of us. God has given us all the faith, meaning a message that is the object of our faith. He has given us the gospel of grace by faith. We are to measure ourselves and understand ourselves by it. In his paraphrase called *The Message*, Eugene Peterson rendered that verse, “The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.” Exactly.

Douglas Moo, professor at Trinity Seminary in Chicago, says faith as Paul used it here is, “Basic Christian faith as given equally by God to all…this shared faith (is) the standard by which Christians are to regard themselves.” British theology professor, C. E. B. Cranfield in his excellent and exhaustive commentary on Romans wrote that each of us should measure ourselves, “by the standard which God has given him in his faith…not in the relative strength…of the particular Christian’s faith, but in the simple fact of its existence, that is, in the fact of his admission of his dependence on, and commitment to, Jesus Christ.” He says then and only then do we have a rational evaluation of ourselves.

There is a standard by which we should view ourselves. The standard is the objective faith God has given us all in Christ that makes us one body. It is the message of new life through the grace of God in Jesus Christ. It is only when we view ourselves and our place in this world by the standard of the gospel of grace that we can have a rational judgment about ourselves.

The Gospel of grace has many things to tell us about who we are and about our place in the world. Today I will remind you of 3.First, we are accepted and loved by God totally by grace in Christ. The word “totally” is critical. What Jesus did for us on the cross finished the job 100%. That means we have nothing to prove. We are declared righteous forever. We don’t need to do anything to bring that about, nor to keep from losing it.

Second, we are God’s beloved children. The core of who we are is God’s child. We are of so much importance and value to him that he paid an infinite price to rescue us and adopt us. Third, glorifying God is the purpose of everything, including us. We saw this in verses 1-2. All of creation is about giving glory to God. That includes us. As we think about our place in this world it is crucial that we remember it’s all about him, not me. These truths are the core of our identity. They cause us to be humble, grateful, absolutely secure people who don’t live for selfish motives, but for the kingdom and glory of God.

WE DO NEED TO KNOW WE HAVE GIFTS

When we think about our identity and our place in the world, one factor that comes into play is brought up by Paul in verse 6 where he said, “We have different gifts.” There is a typical thing that often happens with this subject. A list of these spiritual gifts is constructed from the several passages that mention them. The gifts are defined, and then we are told we need to identify which of those gifts God has given us. Much stress in the church is put on discovering our gifts. I believe this takes us in the wrong direction.

When we link our understanding of ourselves with our gifts we enter into the comparison game. What if somebody else has a better gift than I do? Does that make that person more valuable than me? It would certainly seem to. What if I have gifts that I deem to be great, maybe better than what most people have? Does that mean I am better and more important than them? That is not what Paul wanted us to do.

We have an odd tendency to classify ourselves, to give ourselves labels and kind of pigeonhole ourselves. The quizzes about the dwarves that I mentioned earlier are examples, but there are tons of those kinds of things on the Internet and in magazines. Laurie has shown me quizzes that will tell you if you were a Disney princess, which one you would be, or if you were an animal, what animal you would be. Which superhero would you be? In my years of ministry on numerous occasions I encountered systems of identifying types of people. One of the classic was the Myers Briggs system that has 16 personality types. The whole “spiritual gift” thing kind of tends to be the same thing. Identify what kind of person I am so I can understand myself better and decide what kinds of things I should be doing. But there are some problems with this approach.

The lists of spiritual gifts and their definitions never seem to agree. That’s because, as in this passage, they were never intended to be lists. They are just examples of gifts that one might have. They were never meant to be exhaustive or definitive. The number of gifts God gives is enormous when you consider the variations and possibilities. For instance, when Laurie and I discussed this she informed me God has given her the gift of shopping. I’m a little dubious about that one, but maybe she’s right.

A huge problem with this approach is Scripture never tells us to discover our gift, nor does it hint at any process for doing so. I’m pretty sure if God thought this was important he would have told us that we need to do this and how to do it. But he didn’t. That’s because you’ll never understand yourself and your place in this world by seeing what gifts you think you have and using them.

Years ago I saw an example of a problem this approach can lead to. I was in my first year in grad school and had expressed interest in volunteering in the large college age ministry at my church. The leader welcomed me and suggested that I come for a few weeks just to see what they were doing and get to know some of the students. In one of those early meetings they had a guest speaker. This man was quite well known in the church and the community. That morning he told the 200 or so students that were there that he wanted to start by introducing himself to them. He explained a little bit of his history and background, then said, “I have the gift of teaching.” What followed was, in my estimation, irrefutable proof that he did not have the gift of teaching. It wasn’t the worst I’ve ever heard, but it was not very good. He wanted to be seen as a gifted teacher, but he just wasn’t. That was not the last time I have encountered that kind of thing in my years of ministry.

Let me suggest another problem with this idea of pigeonholing ourselves as having certain gifts. In Exodus 3 Moses had his famous encounter with God at the burning bush. God told him he wanted Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. In verse 11 Moses said, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” In other words, “I don’t have that gift.” What followed was Moses arguing with God because he didn’t have the gifts to do this job. In 4:10 Moses said, “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.” I don’t have those gifts! God sent him anyway, and he became Israel’s greatest prophet.

In Judges 6 God appeared to Gideon and told him he wanted him to lead Israel and defeat Midian, which had been oppressing them. In verse 15 Gideon said, “Pardon me, my Lord, but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” In other words, I’m a nobody, I don’t have that gift. God’s answer to that objection trumped it totally. “I will be with you.”

In Jeremiah 1 God told Jeremiah that he had set him apart to be a prophet since before he was born. In verse 6 Jeremiah said, “Alas, Sovereign Lord, I do not know how to speak. I am too young.” Sound familiar? I don’t have that gift. God didn’t seem to care what gifts people had, because it was never about their gifts. It was about God’s ability to use them with all their foibles and flaws. God might well ask any of us to do something we are not well equipped to do because it makes us rely on his power, not our ability.

We are all gifted by God in some way. But it is not necessary to label whatever gifts we have. It certainly is not important to define what the various gifts are and try to attach ourselves to one or more of them. However, understanding that we have gifts given by God means that we have something God wants to use for his purposes. We have a reason for existing on this planet.

WE NEED TO REMEMBER THE BODY IMAGE

We are all part of one body. To understand our place in the world it helps to start with the fact that we are part of a much larger body. Paul says in verse 5 that “we form one body and each member belongs to all the others.” He was using our physical body as an analogy for the church.

We are addicted to freedom and independence in our society. That’s mostly a good thing, but it has a catch. We don’t like being told what to do and we don’t like being tied down. But consider the analogy. Have you ever had a twitch? Of course you have. They’re really annoying. I’ve had a twitch in a big muscle like the quadriceps in my leg. That is so distracting. At the other end of that spectrum is a small muscle, one in my eyelid. It’s small, but when it gets a twitch it is really annoying. What is happening there is that a muscle in the body is operating on its own. It is doing something that headquarters has not told it to do, and it’s doing it without regard to how that might affect the other parts of the body. The follower of Christ who considers himself or herself a free agent, not attached to a body of believers, or who does whatever he or she wants, is not following Christ. They are like a part of the human body that decides it can do whatever it wants or that it doesn’t need to be attached to the body.

We are all essential. This is a big point Paul wants to make. In verse 4 Paul said “we do not all have the same function.” Each member of the body of Christ does what he or she is designed to do. All of them are necessary. My guess is that you don’t know what your hyoid bone is. It sounds familiar, but if you’d asked me about it a month ago I wouldn’t have known anything about it. We hear almost nothing about the hyoid bone. It is a small bone located between your chin and the thyroid cartilage. It plays a role in your ability to breathe and to speak. It seems insignificant. It doesn’t get a lot of notice. But it is critical for us.

Everybody is aware of eyes, heart, lungs, liver, kidneys and of course our intestines. We know what crucial roles they play. But the unknown body parts are essential. That’s how it is in the body of Christ.

We may not even be able to define what our “gifts” from God are. The Greek word translated “gifts” is *charisma*, obviously the source of our word charisma. The -ma ending on a Greek word means “the result of.” So a gift is the result of charis. What is that? It means grace. A gift is the result of grace. A gift isn’t something you earn or deserve. It is something given out of kindness. So anything we have as a result of God’s grace is a gift. And that means everything we are and everything we have is a gift. I’ve heard people discussing what spiritual gifts are as opposed to natural talents. That misses the point. All you have is given by God in his grace. All of it is a gift.

In Psalm 139:13-14 David wrote, “You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” God put us together just as he wanted us. Whatever traits, strengths, abilities, talents, personality we have is due to his work and his grace. They are our unique gifts. The point here is you don’t have to label what you are and do. You don’t have to fit it into anyone’s scheme. You don’t even have to understand all about it. All you need to do is be you and let God use you however he chooses. What you are is needed in God’s plan, otherwise he wouldn’t have made you as you are. You are not the tonsils of the body of Christ that can be removed and the body functions just fine without them.

I had a very good friend in college that I played baseball with who liked to give me a hard time. He was a big, strong guy who had quite a bit of power as a hitter. I wasn’t big or especially strong and I had zero power as a hitter. He and some of my teammates used to kid me by calling me “Ping” because they said that’s the way the ball sounded when I hit it. That’s true of everybody outside of professional ball now because they use metal and composite bats. Back in my college days we used wood bats. You were supposed to hear the crack of the bat. When I hit, they didn’t hear that. I was the king of bloop hits and bleeder ground balls that somehow made it through the infield. I recall one game where my friend struck out twice, hit a long fly ball out to the warning track and a booming double off the fence. I got 3 hits that day, but my friend said, “If you put your 3 hits together back to back the ball wouldn’t go as far as my double did.” Then he said he’d rather hit a ball hard even if it ended up being a long fly out than get a couple of my weak hits. We laughed about it. But I was never going to be a power hitter like him. Trying to do that would have been futile. Nevertheless, the coach played me because while it may not have looked impressive, I got on base. I had one stretch where I got on base every at bat for 3 straight games. The coach valued that, so he wanted me to be me. I needed to accept the role I had and not try to be someone else. And that’s what Paul is telling us. Be who God has made you to be, whatever that mix of abilities, talents, strengths and weaknesses may be.

I thought of Lorin and Laurel Youde. For years in our church they supported the youth ministry. They would go to the events, help with setting things up and running them, just participate. They were just there. They did this even though they had no kids or grandkids involved, they just cared about the kids. What do you call the gift that enabled them to do that? I don’t know, and I don’t care. That doesn’t matter even a little. What I know is what they did mattered to the kids involved. They felt loved. They saw an example of people who loved Jesus and loved them. That’s what Paul wants us to do. Don’t worry about what gifts you have or don’t have, just know God wants to use you to love others.

We are given gifts to serve the body. Think for a moment about your various organs and parts. Are they operating mainly to serve their own interests, or are they serving the body? The liver gets no big benefit from removing toxins from your system. The heart does not become wealthy by pumping blood through your arteries and veins. Your anterior cruciate ligament gets no acclaim for keeping your knee stable. They all work to promote the health of the body.

This is a massively important principle. We are not on the planet to glorify ourselves, enrich ourselves, promote ourselves or protect ourselves. We are here to benefit others, to serve them and to further the kingdom of God. In encouraging the Corinthian church to give to help the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem, Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 9:11, “You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.” Why does God give us resources? According to that verse, it is so that we can be generous. So that we can give to others. That is as true of your “spiritual gifts” as it is of money. Why has God given them to you? Not so you can seem important. Not so you can feel good about yourself. Not so you can compare yourself with others and feel better than them. He has given them to you so that you can serve. So you can love and minister to other people. Whatever you are, make the point of your life to serve others. It’s why you are alive.

It is important to notice what Paul says in verse 9. He discussed spiritual gifts, then seemingly out of the blue says, “Love must be sincere.” Oh, okay, he’s starting a new thought. Yes, but it is not a disconnected thought. Paul’s most extensive discussion of spiritual gifts is in 1 Corinthians 12. What follows that? 1 Corinthians 13:1 says, “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or clanging cymbal.” What follows is the famous “love chapter.” In both Romans and 1 Corinthians Paul is saying what matters is love. Quit worrying about what your gifts are, which is putting the focus on yourself. Instead, focus on loving others. If you truly seek to love people your gifts will naturally come out, whatever they are. The man at the college ministry I described earlier was thinking about himself and the image he wanted to have rather than loving people. If he had been seeking to love people he would not have put himself in a position where they were not helped.

I need to take a moment to talk about a common misconception in the church today. We tend to see the church as an organization, and see ministry as programs. We think if we are “using our gifts” that means working in the organization in some way. I’d like you to think about the first churches for a moment. For the most part they were small groups of people who met in homes. They would meet on Sundays to fellowship, worship together, eat a meal together, pray together, and encourage each other. There was no children’s program, no youth program, no evangelistic outreach program. There was little organizational structure. They were just people who would get together and who would support each other during the week when they could. They would live their lives during the week, doing whatever they could do to be good friends with their neighbors, caring for them as they could.

They used whatever gifts God had given them to build up the body of Christ and to minister to others in the world. There were mostly no positions, no titles, there was just people serving other people. This does not make the large organizations that pass for churches in our culture bad or wrong. It does not mean people shouldn’t serve in programs or organizations. But it does mean that’s not the heart of what it means to use one’s gifts for the glory of God. As we do whatever we can to love, care for, encourage, support, and strengthen other people, we are using our gifts as God intended. That may or may not be in a structured environment. The context is unimportant. It is the commitment to do God’s will and to love and serve others that matters.

IMPLICATIONS

THE BEDROCK OF OUR IDENTITY IS THE GOSPEL OF GRACE

As we have seen, the gospel tells us we are infinitely loved and valued by God. We are his children, not through our abilities or merit, but solely through his grace gained for us by Jesus Christ, his Son. The most important truth about who I am is, I am a beloved child of God by grace.

When we try to derive our identity from anything else it has some negative consequences. Whatever we try to make our identity will always lead us to compare ourselves with others and compete with them. This will either make us insufferably proud or cause us to have a sense of inadequacy, failure and discouragement. It will make us continually insecure, for we could lose that source of identity at any moment.

I once heard a former successful major league baseball player talking about being retired from the game say that one of the best things about being retired is he can finally sleep well. He said during his playing days he never slept well because of the pressure he felt to perform every day. Think of a beautiful woman who has much of her identity rooted in her beauty. What happens to her when age begins robbing her of that beauty? She might turn into that sad woman with a plastic face that can’t seem to move that a cosmetic surgeon has given her. We need an identity that cannot be eroded, damaged or taken away by events in life. That identity is being a beloved child of God, an identity that just gets stronger as we grow older.

WE ARE WONDERFULLY MADE AND ARE IMPORTANT TO GOD’S WORK AS HE HAS MADE US

God has given us the gifts he wants us to have. He has done so because in his wisdom he knows these are the gifts that will best contribute to his plan for us and for his kingdom. He does not make mistakes, because he is perfect. That means his plan for us is perfect. With all our flaws, he plans to use us as we are. So we thank him for how he has made us and do what he has given us to do. Your mix of talents, abilities, strengths and personality is unique to you, God wants to use that mix according to his own wisdom and plan. So just be who you are and focus on the right things, which is not being obsessed with yourself, but loving other people.

OUR FOCUS MUST BE GOD’S KINGDOM AND HIS GLORY

One big problem with the common approach to spiritual gifts is that it ends up putting the focus on self. What is *my* gift? I need to understand my gift so I can feel good about myself. The result of the focus on self is always the exact opposite of what we want. It leads to death not life. The path to life is in giving up self to serve God. Our focus needs to be simply on his glory.

I had some thoughts about this as I was making some guacamole. You might think I’m crazy, but that exercise seemed to me a good analogy. When I make guacamole I cut up some avocados, then put the pieces in a bowl. Then I smash them up together until there are no more chunks. I add some ingredients, such as mayonnaise, salsa, salt and so on. Other people add various things. But then I thoroughly mix them together. The result is a yummy concoction that I love. The individual ingredients are not what I notice. I don’t want those individual chunks of avocado. I don’t want the mayonnaise or the salsa to be the most noticeable element. I want the whole guacamole taste.

I know a lot of people put cilantro in guacamole. Why do people insist on trying to sneak such an offensive thing into an otherwise delicious food? I know many of you like cilantro, but those of us with more discriminating tastes can attest to the fact that cilantro overwhelms everything else. When people do that, I taste cilantro more than anything else. If I have a choice between guacamole with cilantro and no guacamole at all, I’ll take no guacamole every day of the week and twice on Sunday. So I guess I could sum up my point by saying, “Don’t be cilantro.”

The guacamole, and the church, is best when the focus is not on one ingredient, but on the overall effect. And the over all effect of the church is to be the glory of God. When one person stands out like cilantro, that person will be noticed, not God, and the result won’t be pleasant. So let’s be what God designed us to be, a guacamole church where what people notice is the glory of God.