



Romans 12:3-8

Think with Sober Judgment

3 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. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, 5 so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. 6 Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; 7 if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; 8 the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

I am amazed at the change in higher education in the last ten years. Some of you are familiar with CLEP tests, which is a form of independent study. I know a guy who worked at Culvers 30 hours a week and managed to get his bachelor's degree in Business Administration in two and a half years and it only cost him about \$6,000. Just this past week a guy stopped in my office and introduced himself. He is an officer in the Army stationed at Fort McCoy but he feels called to vocational ministry. He is almost done with his MDiv degree at Liberty University. I wasn't aware that you could get an MDiv completely by online distance learning. This educational model does not work for every area of study. You're not going to be able to get a nursing degree, for example, with only online courses but given the fact that Liberty alone has 90,000 online students, it obviously a popular option.

But there is one area where independent study can never work, and that is personal transformation. Last Sunday we worked our way through the first two verses of Romans 12. The goal of this passage and the goal of the Christian life is personal transformation. *Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may*

discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. I mentioned two key principle sin the pursuit of transformation. One, you have to be immersed in the Word of God, and that can in a variety of ways. And second, we must learn to desperately trust God in obedience to the Word which he has taught us. But here's the deal--this absolutely cannot happen through independent study. There is no online course for personal transformation. Let me say it even more clearly. You cannot and will not grow as a believer on your own. Personal transformation of your character must take place within community.

Now immediately, many of you are wanting to disagree with me. That's fine. I like a little push back, but please withhold your final judgment until we are done working our way through this passage.

Let me be clear about what I am not saying. I am not saying that your own personal Bible reading and spiritual disciplines are not effective. That would be about the dumbest thing a pastor could ever say. "Sure, just skip Bible reading and prayer if you can't do it in a group." That's not what I am saying. Neither am I saying that you must do your Bible study and learning in a group setting. I am not saying that you cannot take Bible classes and even earn a seminary degree online through independent study. All of those things are a part of personal transformation, but by themselves, they will never move you forward in your faith.

So when I say that personal transformation of your character must take place within community what I mean is that the living out of your faith must take place within a community setting, in other words, the local church. Let's use verse three to illustrate what I mean by this principle. *3 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.*



This passage is illustrated by the little kitten looking in the mirror and seeing the reflection of a powerful lion. Now this picture is one of those memes that you may have seen on facebook. We could add any number of self-help type phrases to this picture.

"You're stronger than you realize."

"Never let anyone say you can't do it."

"Unleash the beast within."

But I think the best phrase is from the apostle Paul. Don't think more highly of yourself than you ought but rather think with sober judgment. I realize that sometimes what a person needs is just a little boost of confidence to jump into a challenge and do something good. So if cute little pictures like this give you a little inspiration, then so be it. But tell me this. Is this little kitten thinking with sober judgment? Is he thinking more highly of himself than he ought? And what's the common word for this kind of thinking? Pride. I think it's interesting that Paul did not actually use the word pride. But I like the fact that he described pride instead of just using the generic word here.

Don't think more highly of yourself than you ought. This is a universal problem of all people in all places in all times. This problem has resulted untold divorces, murders, corporate crime and every other sin imaginable. I like how C.S. Lewis describes this sin in *Mere Christianity*.

If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins.... According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.¹

I have often said something similar to this, that pride is the mother of all sin. And if pride is the mother of all sin, then what is humility? Humility is the mother of all righteousness. But here's how this fits into the flow of the passage. How do you know that you are prideful? I never realized how prideful and selfish I was until I got married. Karen doesn't have to tell me this directly, though there have been times when she has been a bit less than subtle, but it's the interaction in close relationships that reveal your selfishness and pride. The parenting relationship does the same thing. If I never had kids I would have missed out on countless opportunities to stare my pride in the face.

I have this habit of saying the phrases "that's crazy" and "that's insane" all the time. I hope that's not politically incorrect, as if I am mocking people with mental illness, which I most certainly am not. But if you think of yourself differently than you are supposed to think, then that is a form of insanity. You are delusional. If you think you are a lion but you are actually a kitten, that's delusional. If you think you are somehow better than others, that's delusional. If you think that you deserve special attention, that's delusional. Now I realize that there is a wide range here. You might be just slightly delusional or extremely delusional, but you are delusional nonetheless. Do you see what this means? Since pride is the mother of all sins and since we often do not think of ourselves according to sober judgment, then it means that we are all borderline delusional.

So how can we think about ourselves with sober judgment and what does this have to do with transformation? Don't forget that this point about thinking of yourself with sober judgment follows right on the heels of "being transformed by the renewal of your mind." In other words, Paul was saying that the very first step in personal transformation is thinking rightly about yourself. This is accomplished by looking in two directions.

First, we look in the direction of Christ. As I have said multiple times last Sunday, the Christian life is a matter of spending God's mercy. As Paul said, "**by the mercies of God** present yourself as a living sacrifice." I ordered a special swinging mailbox this week because we plan to finally install a mailbox on our property. A salesman wrote back and included this in his email. "We pride ourselves in 1000% customer satisfaction." I had to laugh a little thinking about a 1000% guarantee. I had never heard of such a thing. I should have asked, "So if I don't like it, will I get 10 times my money back?"

But I can say this: I guarantee you 1000% that your salvation is wholly dependent on God's mercy. Do you see what this realization does to your pride? It kills it. It kills it every time you

think about it and it needs to be killed because we are always resurrecting our dead pride. This is absolutely necessary to thinking rightly about yourself. If you have placed your faith in Christ alone, then you are a child of God. You are in Christ and Christ is in you. That puts you on a level playing field, not just with every other believer but with every other person on the planet? Are you somehow better than the guy sitting next to you? Despite what your flesh whispers to you, the answer is no.

So in order to think with sober judgment about yourself, you first have to look to Christ but the other direction we need to look is to other believers.

For as in one body we have many members,

(and the members do not all have the same function),

5 so we, though many, are one body in Christ, (and individually members one of another.)

No one is saved as a group. Salvation is always individual. I can't ride on the faith of another person. It has to be my own faith. No one is saved as a group but everyone who is saved is saved into a group. You may not like your local church and you can change that if you want, but you can't change the fact that you are now a part of the universal church--brothers and sisters across the street and throughout the world. We are one body.

I put part of the above verses in parenthesis for the sake of emphasis. I pulled out two phrases so that you could see the two linking phrases.

one body-many members

many-one body in Christ

Hey, that's just like what's written on our money, right? *e pluribus unum*--out of many, one. Well, sort of. Our nation is composed on many people--319 million, to be exact, are theoretically, we are all united under the banner of our U.S. Constitution and pledge our allegiance to her. That is *e pluribus unum*. But that is not what we have in the body of Christ. We are one in Christ in every bit the way that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all one.

Paul then proceeded to illustrate this unity within our diversity through our spiritual gifts.

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: 7 if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; 8 if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; 9 the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Lay aside the precise definition of each gift for a moment and just focus on the overall nature of the gifts.

1. Gifts are forms of grace given to us by God.

Paul wrote, *Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.* Gifts are grace. In fact, the Greek word for gift (*charismata*) comes from the word for grace (*charis*). Likewise, 1 Corinthians 12 tells us that they are "manifestations of the Spirit." So as a body of Christ, we have all of the gifts, but as individuals within the body of Christ, we each have only some of the gifts. This is another way that we *many* and *one* at the same time.

2. Gifts are useless unless put into service.

Do you know why I am a pastor? Some will say, "Well because you went to seminary." Or "because you had some kind of lightning bolt call from the Lord." Those things happened very late in the game, so to speak? Why am I a pastor? The number one reason is because I got busy serving. It started during my summers as a camp counselor and then spilled over into my church. When I was still in college, I was asked to be the part time youth pastor at that church. When we were married, every week I taught Sunday School, Karen and I taught Children's Church and I was a deacon. I didn't have a clue what my gifts were until I started serving. That's just one of the reasons I am not too crazy about spiritual gift inventories. Spiritual gift inventories can only help guide you if you are already serving but if you aren't serving, then they are just a wild guess.

It was in the context of all of these serving opportunities that I felt that I might like to do this as a career. I do feel that God led me into ministry and I did get some early affirmation that it was a good thing, but without the years of service, it never would have happened.

Now this is not to say that vocational ministry--that is ministry as a career--is somehow better than any other career. This is one of the reasons I started the Men at Work Project. Not only do I want to hang with the guys and see what they do with 40-50 hours of their week, but I want them to know that their work matters. I want them to see that work can be their ministry. I want them to catch a vision of how they can do their work to the glory of God. I want them to know that you do NOT need to be in vocational ministry to be in the center of God's will.

So whether you do ministry as a vocation or not, your spiritual gift is useless unless it is put into action. I would argue that you don't actually have a gift unless you are using it. Again, 1 Cor. 12 says that spiritual gifts are "manifestations of the Spirit given for the common good." Your gifts are a manifestation of the Spirit but if you are not using them, then they are not being manifested, are they? They are sitting on a shelf in potential form only. Second, they are given for the common good. Your gift is not for you. It was given to you for the good of those around you. Now when you use your gift you get joy out of it and a lot of other benefits, but it was given to you for the common good of others, so if you are not using it, then it is worthless.

3. If you are not serving, then you cannot think about yourself with sober judgment.

If you are not serving, then you will never fully understand the one body but many members. Oh, you can understand intellectually, but you can't experience it. If you are sitting here this morning, then you are being served through the gift of others. You may have children in the nursery of Children's Church. which could not happen without those volunteers. You were given a bulletin and greeted as you walked in. Different people wrote that bulletin, printed that bulletin and folded and stuffed that bulletin. You have participated with the worship team and benefited from their time and gifts. And the worship team in turn is dependent upon the person who created the powerpoint and the two people running the powerpoint slides and the sound board. You listen to my sermon and the preparation I have put into it. You might get a cup of coffee or snack after church. You might be in one of the Bible studies this week or some other ministry during the week. A great many of you are participating in Operation Christmas Child. We are all sitting in this nice building but we forget about all of the people who maintain it, improve it, fix it and clean it.

I could go on, but I think you get the point. If you are serving in one or more of these roles, then you know from experience how you fit into the body. You see and feel the one body but many members. But if you aren't serving, it's like you are on the outside looking in through the window. Here's the thing. As you look through that window it feels like you are inside. It's a bit like sitting in the library during the morning service. We make that available for crying babies and small children. It's a nice place to go for those reasons, but it's not quite the same as sitting in the sanctuary. You have to watch everything through a window and you have to listen through a small speaker on the wall. It's OK, but you are aware of the fact that you are on the outside looking in.

But the problem is that many who are not serving don't even realize they are on the outside looking in through the window at other people serving. You might feel like you are one body and many members, and spiritually speaking you are. But experientially, you are out there looking in. Having said that, let me give you a few good reasons why you might not be serving.

1. You are a new believer and no one has ever told you about spiritual gifts or helped you get plugged in to serve. That is a perfectly acceptable reason for not serving but if this describes you, let me know and we can help get you started.

2. You are fairly new to our church. If you are new, you are still meeting people, understand what we are about, where you might serve, etc. It totally makes sense that you would not yet be active in our church body. Many of you know Stacy Smith. he told me that when he moved to Elroy and visited the church they are now attending, the very first day they visited, they were asked to teach a Sunday School class. And they did and have been very active since that first day. I would never do that to a first time visitor for a lot of reasons. I do think you should take your time and check things out first, but eventually, You will want to find your niche of service.

3. You are burnt out and in a season of healing. Many people have overworked themselves in another church or in life itself. Others have deep wounds from what they experienced in other churches. If for any reason you need to sit back and just absorb the teaching and the music and in every way let other people serve you, then by all means do that. Sometimes that season of healing will last for a year or longer. That is fine. We invite you to use our church as a foundation for God's merciful healing and we pray that there will come a time when you feel you are ready to start exercising your service muscles again.

Beyond these three reasons, I cannot think of any legitimate reasons why you are not serving in some capacity. Now understand that I am not saying that your ministry must take place within the four walls of this church. In fact, I would say that some of your ministry *should* take place out there. Remember, as a Christian you are in full time ministry. So your work is ministry. You have spiritual conversations and occasionally get a chance to share the gospel. You work hard to the glory of God. So when you leave for work tomorrow morning, here's what I want you to do. I want you to say, "Bye honey, I'm off to my ministry." Could you try that tomorrow?

And if you are a stay at home mom, is that ministry? Ladies, here's what I want you to do later today. While you are changing your tenth diaper of the day--and guys too-I want you to say out loud, "I am changing this diaper to the glory of God."

I did a quick look through our church attendance sheet and discovered that 75% of our youth who are 13 years old and up and regularly serving in our church in some capacity. Adults, do you think you are anywhere close to that figure. It's not just that we like to have youth involved in our ministries. At this point, our ministries are *dependent* upon our youth.

But here's the bottom line.

4. If you are not serving, you can never be transformed. Paul is tying personal transformation to the use of spiritual gifts. It is a necessary process if your personal growth. Without it, you are stuck in the mud and looking through the window at others who are busy serving you. Moreover, service is driven by character and it develops character. Did you notice that several of these gifts are paired with an attribute of character?

- the one who **contributes**, in *generosity*
- the one who **leads**, with *zeal*
- the one who does acts of **mercy**, with *cheerfulness*.

The gift of contributing or giving needs to have the attribute of generosity matched with it. Giving is the spiritual gift and generosity is the character. If you have the gift of leadership, you must do it with zeal. Your leadership should be endowed with passion for people and for the Lord. If you do acts of mercy--which by the way, did you notice is an action? You can feel mercy for another person but it becomes merciful when you put your feelings of compassion into action. But that gift is to be paired with cheerfulness. Paul knows that folks who do acts of mercy can get burnt out and like everyone else, can get in a habit of doing it out of obligation.

So as you put your spiritual gifts into action, not only are you serving others but you are also allowing God to shape your character. You might be on your way to church to serve in some way and you pray this prayer. "Lord, I don't feel like serving today. I am tired. People don't appreciate what I do. So I need you to change my heart. I need you to make me a generous giver, a zealous leader and a cheerful helper." You see, character development is built into the process itself.

I want to leave you with an embarrassing illustration. I hope the person who this is about doesn't mind being embarrassed. Can I share this illustration, because I might be talking about you. Actually, it's about me, so you are all safe. Recently I began serving on the board of Living Waters Bible Camp. I have only been to two board meetings and the learning curve is still very steep. Lots to learn. This week the board chairman sent an email asking all of the board members to consider giving a donation to Living Waters which would become a matching fund for every other potential donor. So you probably understand that when you have a matching fund like this one, the funds which you are challenging others to match should be fairly substantial. You don't want to send a fundraising challenge to hundreds of people and say, "The board has donated \$250 and we are challenging you to match this amount." That doesn't inspire too many people. But he asked us to send our replies by the following day. That's totally fine but the whole thing kind of caught me off guard.

So I emailed back an amount, but I was not too happy with the number. He picked up on that and wrote me back an encouraging email. "I read into that you may think that the amount is small. I

hope that you don't feel that way. We are praying that the amount doubles. Whatever we can give from our hearts is what God wants. It will be exciting to see what God does."

He was exactly right. I did think the amount was small and subtly let him know that. Now here are all of the things I did wrong and how they relate to this message. First, I devalued my gift but the reason I did that was out of pride. I was too proud to just admit that I didn't think I could give very much right now. I wasn't thinking with sober judgment. I didn't think too highly of myself but I was thinking too lowly. Both are lacking in sober judgment. Both extremes are wrong. This is like deciding not to serve in some capacity because you don't think you would be contributing much.

Second, I wasn't giving cheerfully. If I had been, I would have sent my amount and have been perfectly content and grateful that God had blessed me enough to even give as much as I did.

Here's the interesting part. The board chair fully intended to encourage me by his email. No question about it, but the Lord used it to exhort me. To show me where I had sinned. And the cool part is that the Greek word for encouragement is the exact same word for exhortation. It all depends on the context. It was given with encouragement but I took it as exhortation, and encouragement as well.

If you are not engaged in regularly serving, then you might think I have been a little hard on you this morning. Are you feeling encouragement from me or exhortation? or perhaps, a little of both. So you could say that I used the spiritual gift of exhortation to encourage you to use your spiritual gifts. I trust that the Lord will use this for your benefit and for his glory.

Rich Maurer
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¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster Touchstone edition, 1996), 109, 111.