

The first thing Paul says about a godly life is that it is a humble life and that an important way of cultivating that humility is by acting on behalf of others. God has given gifts to us precisely to make that kind of other-centered service possible.

“The First Part of a Gospel Life”

Romans 12:3-8

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We return this morning to our series of sermons on Paul’s Letter to the Romans after a break for Palm Sunday and Easter. Remember last time we considered the opening statement of the second major division of the letter. After 11 chapters of theology we have now begun four chapters of ethics. It is always in that order: theology first, ethics second; salvation first, the Christian life flowing from it. The Christian life takes its particular shape from and finds its deepest motivation in the grace that God has lavished on unworthy sinners. Hence the “therefore” with which verse 1 of chapter 12 begins. Or in the words of the 17th century Puritan Walter Marshall, whose work *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* remains a classic in the literature of the Christian life,

“We must first receive the comforts of the gospel in order that we may be able to perform sincerely the duties of the law.”

You can’t live the Christian life until first you are a Christian. In the first two verses we were given a very general statement of the Christian life: the consecration of ourselves to God in gratitude for his saving love and the renewal of our mind – our inner life – leading to a transformation of behavior that will demonstrate itself in an increasing separation between our way of life and the way of life practiced in the world around us.

Text Comment

- v.3 Here “measure of faith” is either another way of speaking of the particular gift or calling that a believer has received from God, the subject of the following verses, or it is a somewhat unusual way of saying that every Christian has the same faith and so the same fundamental understanding of himself as a sinner, of Christ as his redeemer, and of the grace of God as the only reason for his or her salvation. Either way the point is that Christians are not to compare themselves to one another, but liken themselves to one another! We are all in this together. We are all fundamentally the same.

- v.5 As you know the metaphor of believers together forming the body of Christ is a prominent theme in Paul’s letters. Sometimes, as in Ephesians and Colossians, the point of the metaphor is to describe the dependent relationship of the body to Jesus Christ the head of the body. In 1 Cor. 12, as here, the point is to describe the interdependent and interconnected relationships between the parts of the body itself. We all belong to the same body and each has his or her own contribution to make. You remember how Paul spins this out in I Cor. 12: someone is an eye, someone is a hand, someone is an ear, and so on. It is a wonderfully apt and helpful image.

- v.6 The meaning of “in proportion to our faith” is much debated. There is no “our” in Paul’s Greek. The phrase is literally “according to the analogy of faith.” Perhaps it is most likely to mean that the prophets are to be sure that their utterances are in keeping with their faith in Christ. [Moo, 766]
- v.8 The term for “serving” is *diakonia*, a word related to the official term “deacon.” [The word Paul uses here for “the one who leads” is also used elsewhere of church officers: elders and ministers. So it has sometimes been thought that we have here a reference here to at least two of these “official” gifts. But, as I will say later, it does seem to me that these are gifts we are to understand that all of us have to some degree.] It is, to be sure, a word often used generally, to mean service of all kinds.

The Puritans of the 17th century had a term for what Paul does here. They referred to it as “breaking grace up small.” By that they meant that it was characteristic of Paul to follow up the statement of a general principle – such as we have in vv. 1-2 – with exposition and with specific applications. And that is certainly what Paul is doing. In the paragraphs that follow the opening verses of chapter 12 he is going to give us some more specific idea of what it means to “present our bodies as living sacrifices to God, holy and acceptable.” Paul is going to give us concrete instances of the way of life that is a fit response to salvation by grace.

And it is obviously interesting and important that Paul must begin his exposition somewhere and chooses to do so by saying that we ought not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought. Humility begins Paul’s more detailed exposition of the Christian life. Humility is the first thing. There is nothing terribly surprising about *that*. Augustine said that if you asked him what the first thing in godliness was, the second, and the third, he would say “Humility, humility, humility,” which makes us wonder if Augustine was ever a real estate agent!

And why humility first? Well perhaps for several reasons. The life that Paul is going to describe to us he said in v. 1 is the life that responds to the mercy of God. Humility is necessary for such a life because pride, self-admiration, is the contradiction of gratitude for undeserved mercy. Further, this life is a life lived in imitation of our Savior and the Lord Jesus was the man of all men who did not think more highly of himself than he ought to, but humbled himself for others. And finally the life Paul is going to describe is an other-centered life and that too requires humility. Arrogance and the love of others cannot live together in a single heart.

But why *this* argument for humility? Paul doesn’t say this but surely he expects us to think this: he has just spent a great deal of time proving to us that we are guilty sinners and deserve nothing but God’s wrath. He has explained how the Father loved us nevertheless and sent his Son to die for our sins and reconcile us to God. He has said in many different ways that our salvation, our hope of everlasting life depends not upon ourselves, upon our efforts, upon our deserving, but entirely upon the love of God, the sacrifice of Christ – offered while we were still his enemies – and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Obviously we ought not to be proud people, stuck up, enamored of ourselves. To be so would be to violate every principle of the gospel of grace that Paul has so carefully and powerfully described. To think highly of ourselves would be to forget our sin and guilt, to make little of the love of God, and to act as if we had not been in desperate need of Christ’s sacrifice. It would be to forget our election, our redemption, and our

regeneration by the Spirit. It would be altogether to forget that we were going to hell and deservedly and that now we are going to heaven because Christ loved us and gave himself for us.

But, although all of that is implied in the “therefore” of v. 1, Paul does not repeat himself in vv. 3-8. He gives us a new and different reason not to think too highly of ourselves. Think of it. Could we not expect that after 11 chapters of Paul’s exposition of divine grace nothing else would need to be said to prove that pride and self-admiration were utterly incompatible with the Christian faith? What more would anyone need to hear than that he was a desperate and hopeless sinner, in bondage to his sins and deserving of eternal death, and was saved in the nick of conversion by a great love and a terrible sacrifice neither of which he did anything at all to deserve. And yet Paul apparently doesn’t think that is going to be enough. More needs to be said. Other arguments need to be offered. If that is not proof of how great our problem with pride is, I don’t know what would be. If the magnificent argument for humility furnished in Romans 1-11 needs still to be supplemented by more arguments still, then we must be, you and I, very proud people!

Pride is the ultimate and the bottom vice of the human soul. Impurity, anger, greed, hatred and all the rest “are mere fleabites in comparison.” [Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 109-114] Pride made the devil the devil and it is pride that lies beneath all the other vices, this ugly lie that we tell ourselves about our own worth and virtue and importance, about how much we deserve from God and others, and about how evil it must be for others to ignore *us*, or belittle *us*, or fail to appreciate *us*, or fail to serve *us*. Pride is so fundamental, so pervasive and we are so used to it that we usually almost entirely fail to recognize how much of it we have and how constantly we are in its grip.

Pride expresses itself in different people in very different ways. Alexis de Tocqueville observed that in his day the French and the English were both proud, but differently.

“The French,” he said, “want no one to be their superior. The English want inferiors. The Frenchman constantly raises his eyes above him with anxiety. [For fear of finding somebody else higher up.] The Englishman lowers his beneath him with satisfaction. [Looking down on all the people less worthy than himself.] On either side it is pride, but understood in a different way.”

And this passion we feel for comparing ourselves favorably to others is, alas, finally nothing more or less than a fixation upon ourselves, a worship of ourselves. We are as Augustine famously put it: *homo incurvatus in se*: man curved in on himself. Man was made to look up and out, to God and others, and we have been twisted so that now we look almost entirely at ourselves. We are so used to doing so that we find nothing strange in it.

And the Christian has not by his new birth or his faith in Christ suddenly lost his pride. He may now see it for the sin it is, he may begin to fight against it, even furiously, but he has, she has no doubt how much of it remains in the heart. William Cowper, the great poet and hymn writer, wisely admitted that he couldn’t even praise God for his grace without taking pride in his praise.

When I would speak what thou hast done

To save me from my sin,
I cannot make thy mercies known,
But self-applause creeps in.

And if you consult the experts on the Christian life and the cultivation of godliness, the men and women of the church's past whose counsel we trust the most, you will be amazed at the expedients they thought necessary to battle the raging pride in their hearts. Many of them confide to their journals or advise their correspondents that it is essential to get into the habit of not talking about yourself or of actually cultivating the shadow because the limelight is so destructive of humility. Others will speak of the necessity of refusing to defend yourself even, perhaps especially, when you are unjustly criticized or condemned. This is one reason, one very simple reason, why we do not find much humility in politics. In that world one is always defending oneself and criticizing others. And, if that must be done, as surely it must in some cases, it poses a great temptation to the soul nevertheless. We are very apt to despise and to look down upon people with whom we disagree and humility is never cultivated by looking down on other people.

People listen to recommendations like these nowadays – advice that with respect to pride amounts to gouging out one's eye or cutting off one's arm – and they are very likely to think such advice simply weird, utterly impractical. But then modern people are likely to be very proud, unaware of the measure of their pride and not particularly interested in being humble. Humility is so foreign to the sinful human mind that half-measures are very unlikely to suffice. One must hate pride and love humility and be willing to do extreme things to cultivate a humble heart. Pride is so deep-seated a sin that if it is going to be got out it will have to be ripped out. People laugh at St. Francis who dealt with the many compliments that came his way by having a brother monk whisper criticism into his ear day after day, but, then, few people are humble like St. Francis or even want to be. Indeed many modern people, including Christian people, have so little awareness of their pride and so little true understanding of humility that they often speak in ways that seem perfectly sensible to them but even unbelievers generations ago would have blushed to think of themselves saying, like the man who in his autobiography wrote, apparently with straight face, "I have never lost the childlike humility which characterizes all truly great men." [Cited in Dudley-Smith, *John Stott*, ii, 452] Indeed, we have institutionalized pride in our modern culture so that people are literally incapable of recognizing its expression when they see it, or hear it, or utter it themselves. No one is likely to worry overmuch about self-congratulation or looking out for No. 1 in the age of the "touchdown dance" or the bumper sticker that proclaims "My child is an honor student at such and such a school." Imagine someone leaning over to you in the pew and whispering to you, "My child is an honor student at such and such a school." You would roll your eyes at such a gauche remark; but somehow people think it is virtuous when you put it on your bumper.

So perhaps it is no wonder after all that Paul would think of still another reason for us to think humbly about ourselves and to live humbly before others. And, as he goes on to explain, this reason goes like this: you have certain gifts, only some, not all, and what gifts you have were given to you by God. That means, among other things, that if there is something that you do well, some contribution that you can make, it is because of God's working in you, not because of some innate capacity or talent that you have. As Paul puts it in another place, "What do you have that

you have not received?” And the purpose of this variety of gifts given to the church is that the body of Christ may be able to function as a unity, each one doing his or her part, each one contributing to the whole. Gifts were not given to you by your Father in heaven and worked in you by the Holy Spirit in order to increase your status but so as to be the means of serving God and blessing others.

To sum up: 1) the gift isn't yours and you can't take credit for it; 2) it was meant for the blessing of the whole body not to increase your status in comparison with others; 3) everyone else has been given a gift or gifts as well so they are useless as a mark of personal status or importance; and 4) it is only when our gifts are used in the service of God for the blessing of the body that God is pleased in any case. As soon as you begin to use the gifts God gave you for the purpose for which he has given them to you, pride can have nothing to do with that. Gifts are very often a source of pride, but when employed for the purposes for which they have been given, they cannot be.

Paul has given us a great insight here and has taught us an important piece of Christian wisdom. We are very likely to think that the best way to become truly humble before God and man is to constantly tell ourselves what sinners we are or, perhaps better, that we owe everything to the grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. That is certainly true and the Bible teaches us that often enough. When we are pleased with ourselves and feel ourselves being so, it is right and proper for us to ask ourselves what is there about our lives and how much is there about our lives that we would be absolutely mortified for others to know. And it is always proper for us to remember that everything we have and hope for is God's free gift to us through Jesus Christ.

You know and admire John Stott, the London preacher and, in many ways and deservedly, a bishop of the evangelical world. One of his assistants – Stott remained all his life a bachelor and for years had young men assist him in his work as part of their training for the ministry – remembers this particular exchange.

“Every afternoon at 4:30 pm I bring [him] a cup of coffee. As soon as I set the cup on his desk, he almost always says, somewhat playfully, ‘I'm not worthy,’ usually without moving his bowed head from his papers. One afternoon last week I felt that it was particularly silly for him to equate worthiness with a cup of coffee. When he said ‘I'm not worthy,’ I responded, ‘Sure, you are.’ After a few moments he said, ‘You haven't got your theology of grace right.’ I said back, ‘It's only a cup of coffee...John.’ As I went into his kitchen and began putting things away, I heard him mutter, still with his head bowed to his papers, ‘It's just the thin end of the wedge.’” [Dudley-Smith, ii, 454]

Well, okay. Keep talking yourself down. But there remains a problem with attacking our pride by talking about our sinfulness and God's grace to us. There is a reason this is not the only way to cultivate humility in the Bible. When we make this our sole strategy for killing our pride we find ourselves still always talking about ourselves. We make ourselves the subject of our conversation and of our argument. And for people as proud as we are by instinct and inclination that is a sure way of building up our pride even as we are supposedly tearing it down. I have seen this too often in myself and in others not to realize how insidious a temptation this is. We encounter a style of humility that seems suspiciously like its opposite. We hear a man talk about his

brokenness, a fashionable way of speaking in our circles nowadays, but it is very difficult to resist the impression that we are to admire him for the measure of his brokenness and that he congratulates himself for it.

Perhaps you remember the advice that a worried Screwtape, the senior devil, gave his nephew Wormwood about how to deal with a Christian who was actually showing signs of true humility.

“This is very bad. ... Your patient has become humble; have you drawn his attention to that fact? All virtues are less formidable to us once the man is aware that he has them, but this is specially true of humility. Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and snuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, ‘By Golly! I’m being humble,’ and almost immediately pride – pride at his own humility – will appear. If he awakes to the danger and tries to smother this new form of pride, make him proud of his attempt – and so on, through as many stages as you please.” [73]

And so it is that there is another approach to the killing of pride and the cultivation of humility. And this approach is not self-reflection or conversation with oneself or about oneself. It is action on behalf of others. As so often in the Bible the best antidote to a false state of mind is proper and decisive action. God gave us gifts. They are his present to us and enable us to be useful in his service and a blessing to others which is an extraordinary privilege for mere human beings. *The gifts have humility in them* if only they are used as God intended them to be used. To be humble one can attempt to bring his heart and soul into a humble frame, to attempt to cultivate a self-effacing and Christ honoring state of mind – surely this should be done – but to be humble one can also act in humility, that is, act on behalf of God and others. *The simplest definition of humility in the Bible is a life lived for God and others.* If our hearts are not always where they ought to be in this regard, it will be a smaller failure if our actions are nevertheless the actions of a humble man or woman. And act often enough in this way and your behavior will wonderfully settle your mind and sweeten your spirit in the very ways wise people have understood to be the very nature of humility.

That is the burden of Paul’s saying here that if you have a gift from God *then use it!* Your gifts are callings and callings are to be fulfilled. None of us any more has the gift of prophecy, but many of us have the gift of service besides deacons. Many of us have some measure of the gift of contributing to others and all of us have some measure of the gift of mercy. Clearly that is the way we ought to read this list. Paul is speaking to the church in Rome, the Christian community there. He is not saying to them that while most of them have no gifts, the leaders of the church who have gifts ought to use them. Obviously that is not his point. He intends us to understand that the gifts he has listed – perhaps only a representative list to be sure, there is a larger and somewhat different one in I Cor. 12 – are gifts that all Christians have and are to use.

Who does not have some measure of the gift of mercy? Who can be a Christian, a child of God, a follower of Christ who does not have some capacity for showing mercy? Well, if we have that capacity, we are to employ it and employ it on purpose and with enthusiasm in the Body of Christ. Who cannot contribute? Who cannot serve? Indeed, on one level, who cannot teach or exhort? These are the basic gifts of Christian service and we all have them to some degree. Well then, let us put them to work. And when we do, when the use of our gifts for the sake of the body

of Christ becomes the active intention of our hearts, humility grows and pride withers *in the nature of the case*. You cannot live that way, serving others with the gifts God has given you, and continue to think of yourself more highly than you ought.

Let me reduce this to a single case for the purposes of illustration. I said earlier that pride does not usually express itself in open self-congratulation though in our culture it is more common that it does. Indeed, we typically despise boastful people and most people know better than to boast openly of their own accomplishments, though in our clueless age this is becoming more common. Pride usually, however, hides itself behind other vices.

What, for example, is one of the most destructive forces in human life? Is it not anger? Anger causes little children and wives and even pets to cringe in fear. It is a terrible thing to live your life afraid. It shrinks the souls of those who are its objects and it hardens the heart. It creates a deep and abiding bitterness that a person will spend the rest of his or her life trying to escape. Anger destroys, chills, saddens, impoverishes, corrupts, and it steals the promise of life from its victims. It accomplishes nothing good, only harm. Anger is the opposite of doing mercy, of serving, and of contributing generously to others.

The angry person absolutely needs to face the fact that his anger is just a particularly vicious form of his pride, a pride that is more than faintly ridiculous; it is genuinely absurd. Why should a person who harms others with his anger think that somehow he has a right to be taken seriously and to be admired and to be served? Let him speak the truth to himself for once. He's a fool, a weakling; selfish and arrogant; a pathetic excuse for a man. His chief achievement in life seems to be to make his family and those nearest to him miserable. So far from living so as to be missed, everyone will heave a sigh of relief when he is gone. If you are such a person I can well understand your not liking to hear this, but it's the truth and everyone knows it's the truth. *You* know it's the truth. There are a lot of angry people because there are a very large number of people who think of themselves more highly than they should and anger is one symptom of that kind of thinking. Anger is what happens when a person finds that others don't think as highly of him as he thinks of himself.

Last night I gave our dog a bath. I do it in the shower because we have the wand that makes it easier to wash off the shampoo. He was doing quite well, actually, we were having a decent time until the very end when I had to soap up his head and ears and rinse them off. Then he began to fight and struggle and somehow got out and shook himself, sopping wet, on the bedroom floor. And I got angry. Fortunately I had been thinking about this sermon and I thought to myself, "What a fool! A fool that gets angry at a dog because he is upset about getting water in his face." What is wrong with somebody who thinks that somehow or another his dog should know better than to make his master's life uncomfortable or inconvenient in some way? Someone said a gentleman is a man who uses a butter knife when he is alone. Well a godly man is someone who checks his anger when he is alone with his dog, shaking water all over the bedroom because he got out of the shower before he had been dried off.

Well talk to yourself absolutely. Preach your own sin and God's grace to yourself without a doubt. Force yourself to face facts. Hold your nose to the unpleasant smell emanating from your heart. But, then, do what Paul tells all proud people to do. Serve others. Do it on purpose. God

has given you the capacity to serve others so do it and see if it doesn't change the way you think about yourself and lay the ax to the root of your anger.

Several years ago a woman sitting the row ahead of me on the plane accidentally spilled her Pepsi on her seatmate. He stood up in the aisle and very politely asked a stewardess for something to dry himself with. After he walked down the aisle to fetch a towel the woman herself stood up and said in my hearing to the same stewardess, "I spilled my Pepsi on him and he is very angry with me." Her voice was shaking. I felt so sorry for her and so ashamed of that man. Who cares about his trousers, about the spill? There was a woman next to him who was embarrassed and fearful of his response and he had a golden opportunity handed him to show her mercy and to serve her. And he squandered it and then made it worse by acting so calmly before the flight attendant, as if he hadn't shown his anger to the woman sitting next to him. He was unkind and a hypocrite to boot. And such is life for everybody a thousand times a day. Little slights, angry responses, selfish behavior – people thinking of themselves more highly than they ought again and again and almost never facing the fact that that is what is happening – your raging pride has been offended in some way, shape or form. It is disgusting.

Think of what might have been instead. The man quickly assuring the woman that it was nothing, that he had done the same himself, chuckling about it, and then quietly using his napkin to dry himself as he could but waiting to go for a towel until later when the woman wouldn't connect his departure with her gaffe. Now that would be a man who wasn't thinking more highly of himself than he ought because that is what a man who is thinking correctly about himself *does*. That is how you tell about pride and humility: *what a person does*.

But where is that man? Well I'll tell you where you ought to be able to find him in numbers. In the Christian church where we are not only always remembering our sin and God's grace – and so always extending mercy to others as it has been extended to us – but where we are making it a daily practice – until it is the daily habit of our lives – to serve others in the ways God has made possible. That is what God has given us the ability to do and what he has called us to do. And if you want to have a right mind and a right heart, there is no better way than to do those things that a right-minded and a tender-hearted man or woman would do.