

A Renewed Mind: Thinking about Ourselves
Romans 12:3-8

Today's passage challenges us to do something very difficult: to evaluate and change (if necessary) how we think about ourselves in relation to each other. This is difficult because we all have deeply-ingrained ways of thinking about ourselves that may or may not be accurate. Many times these ways of thinking go back to childhood.

Dave Simmons was a mentor of mine throughout my 20s. Dave played football in college and in the pros; Dave wrote books; Dave owned the camp where Brenda and I met and worked for 3 years. But Dave's dad had a nickname for him that rattled around in his head. The nickname was "Stoop," which was short for Stupid. Even though Dave was successful and brilliant in many ways, he had a hard time not thinking of himself as stupid.

You may find it equally difficult to think accurately about yourself. Ultimately it is a deep work of God when we begin thinking about ourselves the way God does. What we're talking about today is often difficult. But if you begin thinking rightly about yourself, you will have a newfound freedom to live the life God calls you to live. Specifically if you understand your God-given role in the body of Christ, you will have newfound freedom to be used by Him in the lives of others. And that is very satisfying.

A Challenge to Think Accurately about Ourselves (Romans 12:3)

Verse 3 gives the primary challenge of this passage. Notice that Paul begins with the word "for," indicating that he is giving an implication or application of what he wrote in verses 1 and 2. Paul is presenting one of the core ways that we present ourselves to God as "a living and holy sacrifice"; Paul is explaining one of the core ways in which we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

3 For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

When Paul writes, "through the grace given to me I say to . . . you" he is referring to the grace God gave him to be an apostle whose teachings carried the authority of God Himself. Paul's primary challenge involves how they were to think about themselves. Paul uses various forms of the verb "to think" four times in this verse: I say to everyone among you "not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound thinking/judgment." One of the foundational building blocks of your thought life is the way you think about yourself, especially in relation to other believers.

Paul first gives a negative command: ". . . I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think." He is warning against pride. As you know, pride manifests itself in what we say and do. The context suggests that Paul is specifically warning against such prideful thinking in the body of Christ: "I am more important to the

cause of Christ than others. . . My gifts are more strategic in the body of Christ than others. . . I am superior to others in the way I think, speak, and act.”

Notice that Paul was speaking to **every single person**: “I say to **everyone** among you. . .” This means that every single one of us needs to hear this warning against pride. The entire believing community needs to have the same commitment to humility.

Second, Paul gives a positive command, an alternative to prideful thinking: “. . . but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.” The term translated “sound judgment” is sometimes translated “sober judgment” (NIV). It’s the same term that was used of the demon possessed man after Jesus cast the demons into the swine; he was “clothed and in his **right mind**” (Luke 8:35). If you’re in your “right mind,” your thoughts line up with reality (as opposed to be paranoid or delusional). That’s Paul’s challenge to us here in Romans 12:3 when he tells us “to think so as to have sound judgment/thinking”; he is challenging us to think accurately about ourselves.

Specifically, he says “as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.” Scholars disagree on exactly what Paul is saying here. Everybody agrees that Paul is **not** talking about “**the** faith” - the Christian faith. He’s talking about the faith that we each exercise. I believe Paul is saying that as we renew our minds and think accurately about ourselves that **God** gives us a measure of faith concerning our roles in the body of Christ. Eventually we each have a God-given confidence about how He wants to use us in the lives of others. As we grow our confidence about our roles in the body of Christ will grow deeper. But at any given time in our lives, we need to allow our God-given faith/confidence to inform how we think about ourselves.

Just as he wanted **everyone** to avoid prideful thinking, Paul wants **each** of us to think accurately about ourselves. Imagine how healthy and functional and joyful this community would be if every single one of us put aside pride and came to a place of confidence about the role that God had given each of us in the body! We would be more eager to worship and grow and serve together. People **outside** that church would recognize, “That’s a healthy group of people, without all the competition, strife, pettiness, gossip, and slander that’s so common. . .” And some might just be interested in finding out about the life we have in Christ.

An Analogy Illustrating the Importance of Thinking Accurately about Ourselves
(Romans 12:4-5) As in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul has us think about the church as the body of Christ.

4 For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

When we stop and think about it, we would all agree that it’s a good thing that the various members of our physical bodies “do not have the same function.” We celebrate the diversity that exists in our physical bodies. We readily accept that specialization is a

good thing. We intuitively understand that when one part of the body fails to function as it should that the entire body suffers. For example, when I'm out in the shop and I get a splinter under my fingernail, it affects my entire body. My entire body has a vested interest in removing that splinter so that finger can do what it uniquely does. I don't say, "I've got nine more fingers, so I can just ignore that one. . ."

In the same way, Paul reasons, "we who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." As an expression of the body of Christ, every single one of us matters. We are individually members one of another. This means that if some of us think more highly of ourselves than we should, the body will be out of balance. If some of us think we're worthless and fail to fulfill our God-given functions, the body will suffer in some way. But if each of us thinks rightly about ourselves, we will together represent Christ accurately and compellingly on this earth.

Examples of Thinking Accurately about Ourselves (Romans 12:6-8) This is what it means for people with various gifts to think accurately about themselves.

6 Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; 7 if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; 8 or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

Paul stresses here that each of us has gifts that differ according to the grace **God** has given. Interestingly, in Ephesians 4:7 Paul writes that Christ has given each of us gifts. And in 1 Corinthians 12:11 he writes that the Holy Spirit distributes gifts to each believer. Giving spiritual gifts is a trinitarian activity; the triune God has given each of us specific aptitudes for serving others in the body of Christ. As in the human body, there is specialization in the body of Christ; God has given different people different functions. This is one of the core truths that should inform the way we think about ourselves.

There's a huge difference between thinking, "I'm pretty good at showing mercy to people who need it," and "The triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - has given me the gift of mercy because through me He wants to show people just how merciful He is!" If you really believe that the triune God has specifically gifted you to fulfill a role in the body of Christ, you will have a sense of **stewardship** for that gift and a sense of **anticipation** about how God wants to use you in the lives of others.

As we individually use our God-given gifts, we corporately represent Christ well. The goal isn't merely to have individual Christians who are used by God. The goal is to have a fully functioning body of Christ. Unless we understand this we will have an individualistic approach to the Christian life; we will either think too highly of ourselves or too lowly of ourselves.

Paul gives seven examples of people who exercise their gifts according to God's design. Let's look at each of them briefly. This list isn't exhaustive; it's representative of the types of gifts God gives. [By the way, we are never directly commanded to figure out

our spiritual gifting. It seems to be assumed that as we live in community with each other, our gifts will surface and become obvious. You might find it helpful to ask a few people who know you well, "How do you think God has gifted me? What are your observations about how God uses me in others' lives?" Quite often the people who know you best have great insight into your giftedness.]

if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; A word of prophecy is a message from God for a person or group of people. Sometimes a prophecy was a prediction - such as when Agabus predicted a famine in Acts 11. But a prophecy can simply be a timely biblical truth that God wants communicated. Paul's directive here is that the gift of prophecy needs to be exercised "according to the proportion of [the person's] faith" - which basically means in a way that is fueled by his/her faith/confidence in God.

if service, in his serving; Service is a rather general term; it often has the connotation of meeting tangible, physical needs. If you have been gifted in service, know that God wants to meet needs through you. If you aren't actively serving, needs will go unmet.

he who teaches, in his teaching; A teacher is someone who communicates truth in a way so that others understand and receive it. A teacher takes great pains with what is said and how it is said. Teaching can take place in large-group settings such as this one, in smaller groups of people and one-on-one. You know whether or not you're a teacher by whether or not people learn from you. If the teachers in our midst don't teach, the church will lack spiritual knowledge. Since knowledge informs our thinking and living, there will be deficiencies in our walks with God.

he who exhorts, in his exhortation; The term translated exhort is often translated encouragement (as in the NIV). If you exhort someone you urge them to do the will of God. If you encourage someone you give them the courage to obey God and to remain faithful. If the encouragers in our midst don't use their gifts faithfully we as a church won't be as obedient and as faithful as God desires.

he who gives, with liberality. People with the gift of giving are very motivated to give away money and possessions and all sorts of things. People who are gifted to give should do so "with liberality" or "generously." Such generosity reflects God's generosity toward us. Those with the gift of giving are responsible to give generously and freely so that resources get where God desires.

he who leads, with diligence. You know if you have gifts of leadership by whether or not people follow you. There's a need for leadership within specific ministries and efforts (Alpha, men's/women's ministry, etc.); there's a need for leadership over the entire church. Those who lead should lead with diligence. Instead of being lazy or careless, leaders should be diligent so that other people get where they need to go.

he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. If you've been gifted to show mercy, Paul's directive is to do so "with cheerfulness." Instead of being grumpy or giving the impression that it's a real pain to expend time and energy showing mercy, you should be

cheerful. It's sub-Christian to do the right thing with the wrong attitude. Since Jesus was legitimately cheerful when He showed mercy to people, people in the body of Christ who show mercy should also be cheerful.

If people in a church lived as Paul teaches, that body would be rich in all the ways that matter: they would hear the voice of God, needs would be met, people would have courage to do God's will, resources would get where God wanted them, people would be led into fruitful ministry, and they would experience the joyful mercy of God. Instead of competition and comparison and pride (and all the accompanying strife), there is satisfaction and humility. That is a church that is healthy enough to pursue its mission of making disciples of all the nations.

Let me tell you about a family that illustrates how a church could function. In this family each person had great freedom to be him/herself to the glory of God. Consequently, this family was on mission. Bob Goff is an attorney on the West Coast. At one point in his career he was working with the government of Uganda, helping them work through some legislation. After a period of time he was asked to be the American consul to Uganda; basically he would be Uganda's official American lawyer. On his flight home, he began wondering what he would say to dignitaries of various countries. He had some ideas but he decided to ask his kids what **they** would say if they met with the leader of a foreign country.

- Adam, the youngest, said that he would "invite them for a sleepover." Instead of saying, "That's about the dumbest idea I've ever said," Bob told his son that's a great idea "because when people sleep over you get to know them really well."
- Lindsey said that she'd ask them "what they put their hope in." Bob and his wife Sweet Maria agreed that was "a beautiful and important question."
- Richard, the oldest (who had a video camera) said he would record interviews with them and make a movie. Again, instead of rolling their eyes, Bob and Sweet Maria said that's a terrific idea.

As Bob thought about his kids suggestions, he decided they should go for it.

"Let's write letters," Bob said. The kids wondered what their dad was suggesting. "I'm serious," Bob said. "Let's write all the leaders in the world and ask if they want to come over for a sleepover, and if we can interview them and ask what they hope in." The kids got very excited. Maria smiled and loved the idea. Bob told the kids that if any of the world leaders said yes to the interview, even if they couldn't come for a sleepover, he'd fly them to that country and they could videotape Lindsey asking what they hope in.

The Goffs sent over a thousand invitations to heads of state and their assistants. To make a long story short, twenty-nine world leaders replied and said yes to an interview. Over the course of a year Bob put his family on planes and flew them all over the world. The kids teachers were initially furious at being taken out of school, but Bob convinced them that perhaps they'd learn more "interviewing the president of Paraguay then reading a book about him." They interviewed and videoed heads of state all around the world. At the end of each interview Bob presented the world leader with a box

containing a key to their front door of their house in San Diego. He said that if they're not there and the door is locked, just let yourself in . . . we'd love for you to come for a sleepover. One world leader actually came to San Diego for a sleepover.

I don't tell this story about Bob Goff to suggest that everything we do as a church has to be "cool and cutting edge" and "out there." But numerous things about the Goff family do stand out to me. For example, they talked with each other and took each other's ideas seriously. They entertained the possibility that the things others shared (even the kids) were from God. They dreamed and planned and did something. Because each gift was valued and each person contributed ideas and skills, their lives were an adventure. Their lives told a great story.

I don't think there's any reason why the same thing can't be true of the church. After all we're **the body of Christ!** After Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, He returned to the Father. Since Jesus is no longer bodily on earth, how is He going to accomplish the will of the Father? Through us: We are the body of Christ. We represent Christ in physical, tangible ways. He has given each of us specific gifts so that we can say and do the very things He would do if He were bodily here. Given that understanding of the body of Christ, how can our common life NOT tell a great story? We need to learn how to dream and plan and do things, using the gifts that each person has been given.

I don't want to give the wrong impression; this is already happening in lots of ways. I think about the Stephen Ministry that started this past fall. It is led by a team of people with gifts in administration, leadership, and teaching. Around sixteen people are being trained to come alongside people who are going through tough times. No doubt they will use their God-given gifts in some powerful ways. All sorts of other ministries are "on mission" because a wide variety of people are using their gifts in significant ways: REACH had a karaoke night last night; the Alpha dinner party on Tuesday involved people with all sorts of gifts; etc.

But there's a need for every single one of us to think rightly about ourselves and then utilize our gifts week-in and week-out. Some gifts will be used in organized ministries, but many won't. I'd encourage you not to wait until you have an official position to use your gifts. Find ways to teach, encourage, give, serve, lead, and show mercy.

When it comes to being the person **God** has gifted me to be, I really do need to be myself. I need to use the gifts God has given me. And so do you. For the cause of Christ and the glory of God, be yourself.