

EMPOWERED MINISTRY

Romans 12:1-8

INTRODUCTION

We have been going through an extensive study of our core values here at Oakwood. So far we've covered four of those values: biblically grounded, prayerfully dependent, Gospel-centered, and relationally connected. Today we will begin a three-part series looking at our fifth value, which is *empowering everyone*.

Our heart's desire at Oakwood is that no one would be content to sit on the sidelines and watch others fulfill the ministry of the church, but that *everyone* would become involved in fulfilling the ministry of the church! We reject the notion that there is an elite class of Christians (paid staff) that is responsible for doing the majority of the work. Rather, we wholeheartedly believe God calls *everyone* to use the gifts they've been given to play a part in God's work.

We are very blessed here at Oakwood that so many attenders and members are faithful workers. We had a special event this past Friday night to celebrate our many volunteers. It was appropriately called "An Evening with the Stars." When I was going over the invitation list, I was blown away by the number of people invited! I'm sure you're familiar with the 80/20 rule: 20% of the people do 80% of the work. What a blessing that this stat is not true here! What's far more accurate is that 80% of the people do 100% of the work!

But far more than being involved, we want everyone to feel empowered. Did you know that our ministry is a supernatural ministry? It flows out of divine resources provided in the Holy Spirit. When we feel unimpressive, the Spirit loves to impress us. We do not merely show up in ministry; we show off in ministry the Gospel through our supernatural witness! This is demonstrated in other worldly love, generosity, compassion, and encouragement, just to name a few. ***We should all want to move not just toward involvement, but empowerment.***

CONNECTION: The reality is that we are all not there. Some of us operate too much in the flesh; others of us struggle to get out of our self-centered world; still others lack courage to step out in this way; and others don't want to let go of their control and allow the Holy Spirit to control their life. ***Rather than an empowered ministry, many of us often operate out of an impoverished ministry.*** We choose to not avail ourselves of the rich resources we have in Christ but choose rather to settle for our limited resources. We wonder then why we struggle to see God show up in our efforts! Why move out in ministry if it doesn't seem like God is leading and empowering the way?

BODY

Our text for today in Romans 12:1-8 will help us uncover three movements toward empowered ministry. ***But before we dive into these movements, we must first wrestle with the motivation for movement.*** Everything that follows in our text hinges on a phrase in the first sentence. It says this: ***"I appeal to you therefore brothers, by the mercies of God..."*** We can see that Paul's appeal is an application based on a previous conclusion. ***God's mercies provide the reasoning for His people's ministry.***

BACKGROUND: The Apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans to a church he had yet to visit. Therefore, they did not yet have soundness and solidarity in the Gospel message. One person heard one thing about the Gospel while someone else heard something different. Paul's letter brought clarity to what was foggy. ***The first 11 chapters of the book of Romans thus focus on doctrine, but chapter 12 marks a clear transition into application.*** Some theologians call this the indicative-imperative complex: We first state what is true (indicative), but then proceed to what we must do (imperative): It must call for a response. ***Conclusions of truth naturally lead to commands of action.***

Parents understand this. When your kid asks why you are commanding him to do something, moms, your answer can be as simple as, "Because I'm your mother!" What other reason do you need? Your command is legitimate

after concluding the truth of your identity in his life: You're the mom! That's motivation enough!

The motivation for ministry in ch.12-16 is based on God's mercy found in ch.1-11. It shows that our ministry must always flow out of God's mercy. In fact, this is our **BIG IDEA** for today: *Let God's mercies move you to ministry.*

I'm sure some of you like to drive your car fast! I'll be willing to bet that some of you here picked your car primarily because of how fast it can go! But imagine what would happen if you forgot to put gas in the gas tank. Your car, no matter how beefed up it was, wouldn't go anywhere! In a similar way, the mercies of God are like the fuel of the Christian life that move us into ministry. If we have no mercy from God, why should we be moved to minister to God? ***Our ministry is motivated by His mercy to us.***

The pastor and prolific author, Max Lucado, says, *"There is a difference between grace and mercy. Mercy is the decision of God not to punish us. But grace is the decision of God to save and bless us."* Do you remember what Adam and Eve did after they sinned in the garden? They settled down in hiding behind some bushes. Their sin and its probable judgment from God paralyzed them. This is what happens to us. If we do not know or experience God's mercy over our failures, it's natural to settle into a stationary position. ***Our moving out could somewhat feel like "coming out" - it only highlights our horrendous sin.***

God knew we couldn't operate in ministry apart from His mercy. He chose to die so that we might live before Him. He chose to cover up and overwhelm our sin with His boundless mercy. Charles Spurgeon says, *"God's mercy is so great that you may sooner drain the sea of its water, or deprive the sun of its light or make space too narrow than diminish the great mercy of God."* And what a joy, church, that with such endless mercy as this, the Scriptures still say ***"His mercies are new every morning!"***

All ministry starts by receiving God's mercy. ***How could we ever be ambassadors of God's mercy if we never received it in the first place?***

It's the whole basis of our Christian confession: "I am a product of God's mercy! It's the reason why I now do what I do in ministry."

TRANSITION: So let's address from our text three movements toward empowered ministry that flow out of God's mercy.

The first is this: **Present your body as a living sacrifice**. A life of ministry has to start here: I have to present my body to God as a living sacrifice. This is an act of complete surrender. It's taking the reins of control and giving them entirely to God.

When we hear the word "sacrifice," we certainly think of the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant, wherein the worshiper was to bring an animal to be slain on the altar. This was performed as an act of worship and a way to temporarily cover the sins of the person. However, when Christ came, He offered up the sacrifice of Himself, thus inaugurating a new covenant in His blood. The Old Covenant sacrificial system was meant to point to this one, once for all time sacrifice. Christ's sacrifice, which brought actual atonement of sin, did away with the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant.

But that is not to say the New Covenant is without a sacrificial system! It is only right that sacrifices be offered up to God under the New Covenant, too, not to make atonement for sin, but as an act of worship because atonement for sin had already been accomplished. Our sacrifices to God do not add to Christ's work but are in response to Christ's work. Because of what He finished, we now freely offer our lives!

When it says we present our bodies, it's more than just our physical selves. John Calvin states, *"By bodies he means not only our skin and bones but the totality of which we are composed. He adopted this word that he might more fully designate all that we are, for the members of the body are the instruments by which we carry out our purposes."*

Notice that the New Covenant sacrifices differ from those of the Old in that these are to be *living* sacrifices. The animals under the Old Covenant would be brought alive to the altar, but once sacrificed, they were dead. But under the New Covenant the exact opposite is true. We who were dead in our trespasses and sins, God has made alive! And, having been made alive by the Spirit, we then present our bodies to God as a sacrifice that is living. ***To offer your body as a living sacrifice is to die to self so that you might live for God with everything that you are.***

How do we do this? V.2 provides a summarized method. It says, ***“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”*** ***Presenting your body as a living sacrifice starts by being removed from the world’s way.*** Jesus said, “Be in the world, but not of the world.” In other words, be with unbelievers but don’t join in their sinful activity.

Few things more thoroughly corrupt Christian pursuits than worldly distractions. ***In fact, the subtlety of distraction often hinders us more than outright sinful association!*** We allow the good things of the world to keep us from the great things of God!

What draws more of my time than it should is baseball. I love watching baseball on t.v. It doesn’t help that Emma loves it, too! That’s often my justification for enjoying it so much; I get to have quality time with my wife by watching the thing I most enjoy! I get to knock it out of the park with my marriage by watching guys on the screen knock it out of the park! I’m not saying I’m feeling a pressure to eliminate baseball from my life, but I sometimes wonder what ministry with my kids I may be missing. → ***It’s a good question for all of us: What ministry might we be missing because of our worldly distraction?***

The same goes for our relationship with Jesus. ***There must be a radical separation in order for a supernatural connection to occur.*** It’s the same with our marriages. We can’t continue a bachelor lifestyle after tying the knot with our spouses. Those who think life continues as before

experience a rude awakening! New life with Christ must require the death of certain sins and even distracting, hurtful habits.

But more than being removed from the world's way, ***we must be renewed in God's way.*** Our text says we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Anyone who has been in the military knows that boot camp is all about breaking you down so you can be built back up in a new way. You need to break down your previous patterns of poor thinking so that you can build back up with new patterns of right thinking. This psychological reprogramming is necessary if someone is going to fun forward into gunfire instead of cowering in fear. All your life you've trained for a peacetime mentality and now they need to reprogram your mind for a wartime mentality. The desired product of the drill sergeant is a warrior, not a civilian.

To accomplish this, the recruit is isolated from the outside world, put under stressful conditions, repeatedly told what they are able to accomplish and how, and then given various scenarios, including what's commonly known as "The Crucible" - a three-day endurance hike carrying 70 pounds of gear with little sleep or food. All this retrains and renews their minds for service to the military.

What are we doing as Christians to retrain and renew our minds for service to our military commander? Sure, we aren't usually doing anything this dramatic, but there must be small, radical decisions we make everyday to promote our godliness. It starts by being in our field manual, the Bible. ***We renew our minds by reading God's Word.*** But more than merely reading, it's important that we are also meditating. Reading helps us understand, but meditation helps us apply. ***When we meditate, we hover over a text to consider how we are to carry out that text in our lives.*** It's how we fulfill the second half of v.2: "...***that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.***"

The more we are in God's Word to read it and meditate on it, the more we will be renewed in our minds. It will move us from worldly civilians to

Gospel warriors. It will move us from fearful bystanders to courageous frontrunners. It will move us from pew sitters to ministry movers. We are first moved to empowered ministry by presenting our bodies as living sacrifices to God.

Secondly, we move toward empowered ministry by considering ourselves with sober judgment. Our text in v.3 says, *“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.”*

The remaining six verses, including this one we just read, pertain to the topic of spiritual gifts. It’s only natural that Paul moves from our general spiritual service to our specific spiritual service with the spiritual gifts given to us. Paul even lists several of these out in v.6-8. But before he immediately transitions to spiritual gifts, he first addresses the attitude to be had with spiritual gifts.

His challenge is for us to think about ourselves with “sober judgment,” or you could say to think of ourselves with a “clearheaded, unbiased perception.” Why was this word of admonition needed? Because spiritual gifts tended to move people from clearheaded to big-headed. They became for many a source of spiritual pride. Instead of ministry being an expression of sacrificial service, it became an expression of personal ability.

We wouldn’t be off to say we struggle with a similar temptation today. It’s not a sin you overtly see on the surface, but it’s a motivation that grows deep within the heart. Why does it fight for attention? Because everyone’s natural propensity is to make much of themselves instead of making much of God. This is what pride is: Pride is simply looking at yourself instead of looking at God. Then in the expression of our gifts, we expect others to do the same: “Let your gaze fall on me and recognize my significance!” We would even maintain that God should get the greater and ultimate end of the glory, “but before your eyes go up in praise to God, be sure you first catch a glimpse of me.”

To be noticed, appreciated, and loved is a deep part of who we are. Tied closely to this is our purpose. High school and college students struggle greatly with this. I know because I remember the anxiety of those days: “What am I suppose to do with my life? Am I able to accomplish it? What if I miss God’s plan? What if I’m not good at anything?” These are thoughts of a deeper heartcry for value, attention, and applause. And when we finally find something we excel at and others notice, it can quickly become an idol that controls our lives.

How do we maintain a humble perspective? ***We first acknowledge that all gifts are of God’s grace.*** What we possess are not personal abilities based on our own merit but gifts of grace based on God’s unmerited favor. Notice v.6 says we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us...” Gifts quickly take the gravitational force off of us and put it on the Giver. When you receive a nice gift from a friend or family member, people usually don’t start applauding you and saying, “Wow, well done! You worked hard to get that, and it shows how great you really are!” Of course that wouldn’t happen because the focus is not on the gift-receiver but on the gift-giver! If anything, people appreciate the one who got you gift.

A gift is never something we earn; it’s an expression of God’s grace. When we begin to see our abilities as expressions of God’s grace, our focus changes. We realize we don’t need to seek significance because God has already labeled us as significant to Himself.

Not only do we acknowledge that all gifts are of God’s grace but all gifts are for God’s glory. Grace reveals the origin of our gifts; glory reveals the purpose of our gifts. They are not given to make much of us; they are given to make much of God! v.5 states that ***“we are one body in Christ.”*** Remember the body metaphor used by Paul? We are the body of Christ here in the church today. And since everyone is different, we all have gifts of His grace that are different. So some are hands, others are feet, others are fingers, and so on. But no one is the head. Paul makes it clear that Jesus is the head.

When you meet someone for the first time, where does your attention go? Do you happen to focus on their shoulder or their kneecaps? No, the focus goes to their head, their face! The point here is that the head is what gets attention, and it's no different in the church. Jesus Christ, as the head of the church, should get all the attention and the glory!

Think about why God would give us gifts. They surely aren't meant to end in ourselves. They are meant to be conduits to His praise and His glory! May we not be secret glory-robbers in our hearts. People may see our gifts being used and immediately give glory to God, but if our motivation is to bring glory to ourselves, we are robbing God. He knows it; Satan knows it, you know it.

1 Corinthians 3 tells us what becomes of someone's work that was only ever for their glory. It says that all our work will go through a refining fire to reveal its true nature. It says the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. Any work done for personal gain will be burned up. Is this not shocking? In other words, jobs done for our glory gain absolutely nothing in God's eyes. May our gifts lead us to sacrificially serve for His glory instead of leading us search for our significance for our own glory.

Considering ourselves with sober judgement moves us to empowered ministry, ***but lastly serving according to God's gift of grace moves us to empowered ministry***. Based on God's giving of spiritual gifts, v.6 urges us to use them!

Let's talk briefly about spiritual gifts. What are they? Pastor and author, Sam Storms, says "*Spiritual gifts, to put it as simply as I know how, are the more or less concrete and tangible ways the Holy Spirit manifests His presence in and through the individual members of the church.*" John MacArthur says, "*A spiritual gift is a supernaturally designed ability granted to every believer by which the Holy Spirit ministers to the body of Christ.*"

A spiritual gift is God's way of using humans to give His grace to others. Our ministry becomes an empowered ministry when God's Spirit moves through us to produce His purposeful end. Generally speaking, our gifts garner greater spiritual fruitfulness. If someone without that gift performed the same assignment, the Spirit likely wouldn't produce the same amount of fruit. It also wouldn't come with the same amount of joy! When we operate in our giftedness, it shouldn't be mind-numbing or torturous! It should be joyous! We usually love what we do best.

So what is God's gift of grace that He's granted to you? Do you know what it is? There are four passages in the NT that mention various spiritual gifts (see image).

Several are listed here. Of course we start with prophecy. It's only here and in 1 Corinthians 12:10 that this gift is mentioned by name in the NT. The greek word properly means to "speak forth" or to "declare the divine will." It means to interpret the purposes of God or to make known the truth of God which is designed to influence people. Many misunderstand this gift as the ability to predict the future. This is sometimes a aspect of the gift, but it's primarily a gift of proclamation, not prediction, a gift of forth-telling, not fore-telling.

This gift is usually accompanied by a strong sense of conviction over right and wrong along with a desire to share that truth into the perceived grey areas of people's lives. Someone with a gift of prophecy feels an urge from the Spirit to bring the Word of God to the people of God for the sake of unsettling them, awakening them, and stimulating them to love and good deeds. But notice it says this gift is to be used *"in proportion to our faith."* This speaking forth is not to be from the flesh, but from faith. If someone isn't intimately walking close to God, they shouldn't be attempting to speak for God!

I honestly think the church today needs more people claiming and using this gift. The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:1 says that we *"should earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy."* We

need more people in love and boldness to speak God's unchanging Truth into people's lives who seem to have changed their course.

You can see the other gifts listed here: service, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership, and mercy. These are somewhat self-explanatory, and I don't have time today to get into the specifics of each. The important thing is that you first know that God gives gifts to everyone and therefore you need to discover what that is.

How do you do that? ***Spiritual Gifts are discovered in practice.*** Find ways to serve in the church or in the community. See what you enjoy. See what fruit your involvement produces. I had no idea if God had called me to pastoral ministry until I got my feet wet in a pastoral internship. Spiritual gifts tests are helpful but not nearly as helpful as seeing your gifts in action. Paul said to his protege, Timothy, in 2 Timothy 1:6 to ***“fan into flame the gift God that was in him.”*** Gifts can only be discovered and developed through practice.

Secondly, spiritual gifts are confirmed in community. How self-perception is often skewed. Either we trust it too much or we've learned not to trust it at all. This is why it's so helpful to ask others what gifts they see in us. Parents, your job is to notice and to name the gifts you see in your teenage children. I think it is the job of church leadership to notice and name those with gifts for a potential call to ministry. Proverbs 15:22 says, ***“Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed.”*** High school and college students, don't let pride prevent the voices of those you trust to speak into your life. Church it is our job to confirm the gifts of one another in our community. This gives renewed life and biblically-grounded confidence to those with gifts to use.

Lastly, spiritual gifts are to be expressed in service. How essential it is that our gifts get used. Paul here tells us to use them. 1 Peter 4:10 says, ***“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.”*** Rick Warren says, ***“Your spiritual gifts were not given for your benefit but for the benefit of others, just as other people were***

given gifts for your benefit.” Once you know how God has gifted you, God will give you opportunities to express it. There are many ministries here at the church that provide ample ways for various gifts to be used.

CONCLUSION

All of this draws us back to God’s mercy: *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God...”* Paul didn’t write the first eleven chapters of Romans to thoroughly explain God’s mercies for us simply to move beyond them. It’s the mercy of God that moves us in the first place but then continues to propel us forward in service to Him. God’s mercy motivates us, builds momentum in us, and ultimately keeps us moving.

There may come a time when you sense your enthrallment with God’s mercy has waned. You are still serving but it’s out of a dry heart and not a full heart. Such a place is a dangerous place to be. We wouldn’t want you to burn out. ***The day that you are serving God without a heart for God is the day you need to stop and get right with God.*** Our big idea today is that we must let God’s mercies move us to ministry, ***but sometimes our need for God’s mercies should remove us from ministry.*** If it means you need to step back from ministry so you can again be moved by the heart of God, by all means do it!

COMMUNION

We want to conclude today with an opportunity for us all to get right with God through communion. Few things can stimulate renewed passion for God’s mercies than partaking of the bread and cup. The reason for this is what the bread and cup represent. They symbolize the real body of Christ broken for us and the real blood of Jesus poured out for us. He took the punishment that we deserved so that we might be spared the judgment we deserve. That is mercy defined!

CLOSING PRAYER