



## **Being the You You Were Made to Be**

### **Romans 12:3-8**

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In this season of Epiphany, in this time of the year following Christmas, we are celebrating the manifestation of God in the person of Jesus Christ, and identifying how we are called to be more focused on our invitation to live as people devoted to Christ. Using Romans 12, we are considering what it means to be spiritual, but not overly religious. That is, we are considering what it means to be true and faithful disciples who are ever discerning God's will, instead of living simply as rigid rule-keepers who are shut off to participating in God's living and ongoing work in the world.

We started in verse 1 with a call to commitment. Being faithful in discerning God's will begins with an intentional focus on seeking God. It means being committed to, listening for, and hearing God's voice that is still speaking to us today.

Last week, looking at verse 2, we learned that we are better than we think we are. The call to faithfulness is not as hard as we might first consider, as we are each created in the image of God. Being faithful does not require us to become something we can not be; instead, it requires intentionality in rejecting the self-glorifying ways of the world and being renewed in mind according to the perfect love of God.

Commitment and intentionality are where we begin this call to a spiritually healthy life. Today, in verses 3 – 8, we find the next step is authenticity.

As a pastor, one of my favorite aspects of ministry is celebrating with couples who are getting married. I love being a part of weddings. If you know someone who wants to get married, you give them my name, or at least invite them to church. Weddings are great ... there's free food, there's an atmosphere of joy, there's love, there's the gathering of families and friends, there are beautiful venues, and did I mention the free food?

One of my requirements to officiate a wedding is pre-marital counseling. If you want me to be a part of the ceremony, you will spend some intentional time with a trained professional considering what it means to be married. I can't over-emphasize how important I believe pre-marital counseling is for couples.

In the first session of pre-marital counseling, I always spend time walking through the lives of the two. I want to know their family history; I want to know the highs and lows of their lives; I want to know who has meant the most to them as friends, mentors, teachers, or coaches; I want to know of significant past relationships; I want to know of their experience with marriage – whether they were previously married, or if there have been marriages that have impacted

their thoughts and vision of marriage; I want to know if there have been divorces among family that have impacted their view of divorce. ... When I say I want to know, what I really mean is, I want to make sure that the other person knows. So much of what we say and what we do is influenced by how we are raised, the places we have been, and the people in our lives, that I find it imperative to make sure there are no stones unturned when heading into a life-long marital commitment.

This conversation requires a great deal of vulnerability, not just for couples coming to be married, but for each of us as we seek to be authentic before God. We have to be honest about how growing up with an alcoholic father still affects the way we cope with our own problems. We have to be honest about how our aggressive high school coaches and teachers still affect the way we handle stress. We have to be honest about how our sibling rivalries affect the way we strive for achievement, or how we give up without trying at all. We have to be honest about how our parents' jobs and their work ethic affects our own work habits. We have to be honest about how the Biblical teaching we grew up hearing still affects how we perceive God and our call to discipleship today.

So much of what we say and do is based on our upbringing. But its also true that much of what we say and do is based on where we are, who we are around, and what we think we're expected to say and do. We tend to "be who we think we're supposed to be" all the time – whether with our friends, parents, boss, church members, or any others.<sup>1</sup>

For example, I really don't have the kind of Southern accent one would expect from someone who was born in South Georgia, and who has spent the majority of his life living in Georgia or in the Appalachian Mountains of Southwest Virginia. But yet, when I used to go to the United Methodist Women's School of Christian Mission, when I was surrounded by some 100 or so southern-accented women in their 60s, 70s, and 80s (at the time, people who were my grandparents age), I had this unexpected reaction wherein my draw would be unstoppable. It's like my inner-mind knew that if I could speak with just enough twang, I could enchant these women into my good graces. It wasn't something I did with any identifiable intention, it just happened. ... Jen says the same happens when I talk with my mother. She can always tell when I'm on the phone with my mom, cause the draw just eases out.

Chip Ingram, in his book, *Living on the Edge*, says this type of reaction, this type of modeling our behavior based on our environment or company, is best defined as "the art of image management." The art of image management leads to superficial alterations, like those manifested in how we speak, how we act, or how we look and dress, and this leads to superficial relationships with others, which leads us to being dead on the inside.

It is this very type of superficial living that Paul is addressing in verses 3-8 in our text this morning.

First, Paul says in verse 3, "Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought to think, but think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." Yes,

Paul is saying just what you think he's saying – you and me, we tend to think too highly of ourselves. It's a sobering reality to admit how imperfect we are. Yet, Paul is speaking with a specific focus in mind – I don't think he's speaking about micro level mistakes we make, like slips in our language or impure thoughts. Paul is speaking about our faithfulness. "Think," he says, "with sober judgment, according to the measure of faith God has assigned." Don't mistake our 21<sup>st</sup> Century hearing with Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> Century writing. When he says *measure*, Paul isn't talking about an amount. We're not baking, so we're not measuring, we're talking about a standard. God hasn't given us a limited amount of faith against which we should compare how well we're doing. "The *measure of faith* is not a portion but a norm. It is the measuring stick that God has given to every believer to 'test and approve' God's will and our lives."<sup>ii</sup>

Paul, then, is calling us to admit that if we are trying to do this thing called life without fully living into faith in God, we're doing it wrong. If we aren't fully submitting to God's will, we can only be thinking too highly of ourselves. If we aren't seeking to be authentically living into faithfulness, we are, soberingly so, failing to be who God has called us to be. So who has God called us to be? Paul continues ...

"As in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another."

This claim by Paul is the same as he has made previously in 1 Corinthians 12. We are one body, and all members of it. Our identity as part of the body is the foundation for who Paul says we are as individuals. We can not be faithful alone, for no individual is equipped with everything that is needed for faithfulness. It is only in the one body – the community of the faithful – that we can be fully living in to God's will.

Unlike the worldly values of self-acclimation, which calls for self-promotion even at the abuse and devaluing of others, "Paul aims at maturity based on believing the gospel of love and grace which sets people free from enduring to achieve their self worth at the cost of others."<sup>iii</sup> We are only able to be who God has called us to be when we are living into faithfulness as part of the body, equipping and giving support to each member of the body, sharing and discerning God's will with the input of each member. "The analogy of the body not only allows for, but even emphasizes the necessity of, diversity, a diversity based on the multifaceted abundance of God's grace itself."<sup>iv</sup>

But for that diversity to be fully realized, for the body of Christ to live in to God's will, it means each member must discern their part of the body. We have to move past the superficial distinctions that have been assigned to individuals by society based on our gender, class, ethnicity, or education, to identify that in Christ we all belong to and with each other. "The only distinctions that matter are the ones based on the gifts given to us by grace. We have been given different gifts so that we can contribute different things to the whole community."<sup>v</sup>

The foundational question we are trying to answer here is, "Who am I?" Beyond any worldly expectations, beyond any superficial presentations, beyond the art of image management, at

the core, who has God created you to be? Stepping out from behind any shadow identities in which we try to present a false truth, Paul says, to play our part in the body, we have to discern and faithfully answer this question, “Who am I?”

You have been gifted by God. We do not all have the same gifts, but we each have gifts. Each person has been given gifts, and to be faithful to our call to community, to be faithful to the necessity of diversity, we must first identify our gifts. Every person doesn't have the same gift, nor should they. The responsibility for each of us to be faithful to the body as a whole, is to identify our gifts and to name them. For the body to be faithful and to live into its identity, each member of the body must first be faithful to naming their own identity.

After we identify our gifts, we then have to answer the question, “What am I supposed to do with this?” After we have faithfully sought to know the gifts of God's grace in our lives, we then have to work to see how our gifts can be used as a part of God's ongoing work in the world as one member of the larger body.

Paul gives a short list of gifts in this passage, but this is in no way a full and exhaustive list of gifts. In fact, Paul is writing to the church in Rome, which he hasn't even visited yet. Paul doesn't even know the members of the church in Rome, so he has no experience from which to name the gifts present in their community. He's using this list in verses 6-8 as a normalized list that tends to be present in every faith community. Prophet, minister, teacher, financial giver, leader, care giver ... these are but a few of the many possible gifts of the Spirit.

For Paul, what's important is not that you have a specific gift; what's important is that you know your gifts, and that you use your gifts as a part of the body. “It must be emphasized that while there is a diversity of gifts, there are no negligible gifts of the Spirit. There are no gifts of God the [faith community] can afford to ignore.”<sup>vi</sup> There are no unnecessary gifts because your gifts are not given for your own self-worth, they are given for the ongoing work of God through the body of Christ – that is, through the church. If your gifts are not being utilized, then the church is not fully living into its call to participate in God's work in the world.

There are a number of books you can read and tests you can take to help you identify your gifts and to answer that question, “Who am I?” I'm going to make available for you an online Spiritual Gifts Inventory from the United Methodist Church's Board of Discipleship. There are twenty possible gifts that can be identified in this inventory. I'm also going to recommend an online DISC assessment you can take, that helps identify your personality style, indicating whether you tend to be detail oriented or big-picture oriented, or if you tend to be task-oriented or people-oriented. These are just two of the many ways to learn more about who you are. While these two are limited in discernment – there are only 20 gifts in the Spiritual Gifts Inventory, and there are only 4 responses in the Disc Inventory – there are many ways to learn more about who you are.

If you want something more, something that has no limit on identifying your gifts, I would recommend a book called “Your Intentional Difference.” Author Ken Tucker suggests that each

of us has a distinct capacity to do some things that others can't do. Tuckers says that if we were to focus on doing those things, instead of trying to live into the many other things the world says will make us popular, or 'successful', then we would be far more adept at participating in God's call to share love that can change the world.

Paul makes this very clear, you need to know who you have been made to be. It takes commitment – it takes time to discern, and finding people who will be honest with you in helping you identify who God has made you to be. It takes intentionality – you have to work at it. You have to want to know who God has made you to be. You have to want to claim your part in the body of Christ. And it takes authenticity. You have to step out from behind the barriers you have set up to make yourself look like something you're not. You have to give up on the societal invitation to have certain gifts or specific traits, and you have to claim your identity in Christ.

As you learn more about who God has called you to be, as you identify more clearly your gifts, as you find the place where you can use the gifts God has given you to participate in the body of Christ, make those gifts known. Knowing who you are means nothing if you aren't utilizing the gifts God has given you. And we – this body – this faith community – this gathering of beloved disciples – we can't be who God has called us to be without each of our gathering living out who God has called them to be. For as in one body, we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members, one of another.

Holy Lord, for your glory, help us to know ourselves more faithfully, that we might be who you have made us to be, that alongside one another, we might make a place for all to know your great love. In the name of Almighty. we pray. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Chip Ingram. *Living on the Edge*. New York: Howard Books, 2010.

<sup>ii</sup> Elizabeth Shively. [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org). Retrieved January 19, 2018.

<sup>iii</sup> William Loader. [murdoch.edu.au](http://murdoch.edu.au). Retrieved January 19, 2018.

<sup>iv</sup> Paul Achtemeir. *Romans: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>v</sup> Sarah Heaner Lancaster. *Romans: Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

<sup>vi</sup> Achtemeir.