

BECAUSE OF GOD'S MERCY...BE HUMBLE
ROMANS 12:3-5

Henry Augustus Rowland was a professor of physics at Johns Hopkins University in the second half of the 19th century. On one occasion he was called as a witness in a court case and his qualifications were given as “the highest known authority in this country upon the subject of the laws and principles of electricity...” A friend supposedly asked him about the claim later and he allegedly said, “Well, what did you expect me to [say]? I was under oath.”



If I asked you, “what is the inner attitude of sin that you struggle with the most?” wouldn’t most of us answer, “pride?” Yup. Historically pride has always been exalted and humility has been shunned — and even in our Christian circles we have ways of seeming to humble, but really being prideful. (“Oh, it was nothing...I’m really unimportant...” can very easily be an attempt to elicit praise and affirmation.)



“Humility is not a mere outward ornament of the Christian, but an essential part of the new creature united to Christ by faith. It is a contradiction in terms, to be a Christian, and not to be humble.” [Richard Baxter]

In Romans 12:2, Paul stressed that spiritual transformation begins in the mind; here in v. 3, he continues that emphasis. If we will be humble we need to think rightly — we must put off all prideful stinkin’ thinkin’.

Paul’s point in this passage is that humility is essential for ministry. Effective ministry is dependent on true humility. And the way that we will cultivate humility is through our mind:

CULTIVATE HUMILITY BY THINKING RIGHTLY ABOUT YOURSELF, YOUR MINISTRY, AND GOD.

These three verses contain **three mind-renewing thoughts** that will cultivate humility in us:

1. **Don’t Think Too Much of Yourself and Your Gifts (v. 3a)**
2. **Do Think RIGHTLY About Yourself and God’s Gifts (v. 3b)**
3. **Do Think and WORK Faithfully with Your Gifts (vv. 3c-5)**

- ✓ God’s gifts are for **FAITHFULNESS** in the one church body (v. 3c)
- ✓ God’s gifts are **VARIOUS** within the one church body (v. 4)
- ✓ God’s gifts are **UNIFYING** within the one church body (v. 5)

- Verse 3 in chapter 12 is the application of the truths of spiritual transformation from 12:1-2 —
 - ✓ When Paul says *for*, he is directly connecting humility to sanctification — he is giving a specific example of what *the will of God* (v. 2) is. And as Paul thinks about the transformed life (v. 2) and ministry in the church body (vv. 3ff), humility is the first attribute he mentions. That's significant.
 - ✓ Notice also that Paul brings this up in the context of the church body (gifts, vv. 6-8; relationships, vv. 9-21). It might be that Paul is also encouraging us that the process of transformation (v. 2) is not just our personal responsibility, but is to be done in the context of the church. We need each other to help us in the process of sanctification. God uses others to sanctify us.
- Humility is not something we do; humility is the overflow of what we *think*. Four times in this verse Paul uses words related to the Gk. verb “to think.” Guard your thoughts. Think rightly!
 - ✓ If we have any hope of overcoming pride in our lives, it will be the result of right thinking.
 - ✓ Our minds are crucial to living righteously (v. 2!). So here are three truths that should be the focus of our meditations. As we think about ourselves and ministry, this is how we should think —

1. Don't Think Too Much of Yourself and Your Gifts

- Paul's words apply to *everyone* — every man — all-inclusive. Not just for AWANA leaders, pastors, elders, deacons, disciplers, etc..., but for *every* believer.
 - ✓ All of us wrestle with the issue of pride (at least if we are not pridefully dishonest).
 - ✓ Question to Piper: “How do you remain humble?” A: “I don’t. What makes you think I am humble? A lot of people don’t think I’m humble.” That is where we all live.
- If you want to serve in God-glorifying way, don’t think highly of yourself. Don’t exalt yourself in your own view or attempt to magnify your importance to others. Two items clue us in to this idea:
 - ✓ *...through the grace given to me* = Paul was the recipient not only of grace, but of astounding measures of grace; he is likely here thinking about his apostleship (**1 Cor. 15:8-10**; Eph. 3:2, 7-8).
 - In some ways, Paul had every reason to be proud (**Phil. 3:4-6**)
 - But Paul did not allow himself to consider his accomplishments as worthy because his “accomplishments” had no value in making or keeping him righteous (**Phil. 3:7ff**).
 - So what does Paul mention this? He has two points —
 - 1) This is not his own opinion and advice, but comes from the God who appointed him apostle. He is speaking (*I say*), but the ideas are coming through him as an extension of God’s grace.
 - 2) He is also connecting this to vv. 1-2 — be humble because everything we have is from grace.

3) While it is difficult to deal with a sin like pride, an accurate evaluation of who we are is an expression of God's grace and kindness to us. Notice also that a virtually identical phrase is used in v. 6 about spiritual gifts. It's God's grace that allows us to serve in Christ's church; it's God's grace that compels Paul to reveal what he does; and it's God's grace that leads us to mortify our pride.

- Paul is the vehicle passing on truth, but he's only a vehicle. Like the armored truck that is filled with cash, his value is only because of the treasure that is in him; Paul is not the treasure. He views his apostleship as *a gift of grace*, not as the result of his accomplishments
- ✓ Then notice Paul's admonition: **not to think more highly of himself...** = The vb. "think highly" has the idea of haughtiness because one has thought of himself in terms that are beyond reality and truth. He has a disproportionate estimation of himself. He has over-thought his position.
 - Paul could hardly be more emphatic about controlling what one thinks about himself — he uses a form of the word **think** 4x in this verse: **not to think...ought to think...to think...sound judgment.** The battle against pride begins in the mind and what we think (cf. v. 2 again).
 - But Paul may also have something else in mind: **mind** in Scripture refers to everything one is in the inner man — our thoughts, desires, will, conscience, heart, and affections. The idea of things that we have love and affection for seems to be indicated in 8:5; Col. 3:2; Phil. 3:19. Paul seems to be saying, "don't love the idea of being exalted and pre-eminent. Don't love exalted places."
 - The danger of being prideful in relation to our spiritual gifts is that we will miss their intended purpose. The gifts are given so that we can serve and build into others. Pride destroys that.
- ✓ Consider the contrast between John the Baptist and his disciples. His followers were concerned that he was losing influence and prominence (Jn. 3:26). John was concerned only that Christ be exalted, even if it meant that he was diminished and made irrelevant (Jn. 3:30). He understood that everything he was and had was only because of what he had received — and he was content with his humble position (Jn. 3:27, 29).

- Let's put this in real life terms —
 - ✓ Don't inflate your value to others (as if you are above service) or the need of others to serve you
 - ✓ One writer has said that Paul is simply saying, "Don't fancy yourself to be Mr. Big!...Don't pretend to be something you are not..."
 - ✓ In the Revolutionary War, a man in civilian clothes was riding his horse along the crest of a hill when he saw a group of three soldiers struggling to mount a canon on a gun emplacement to defend against a British attack. The man watched as a fourth soldier berated the efforts of the three and yelled more loudly the more they failed. The man asked him, "why don't you lend a hand instead of shouting at them?" "Sir! I'm a *corporal!*" "Oh! I beg your pardon. Let me help." So the stranger got off his horse and helped the three and they were able to finally finish the task....

- ✓ Before he got back on his horse, the stranger said to the corporal, “Mr. Corporal, the next time you have a job like this and not enough men, send a message to me at my headquarters and I will come help. Just ask for your Commander-in-Chief, George Washington.” That’s a hard lesson in humility.
- ✓ Whatever we are and whatever we accomplish, it is like Paul, a gift of God’s grace.
- ✓ Our accomplishments in ministry are never about us; they are always about God’s grace and an expression of our devotion to the Savior who gave us an example to follow (Mk. 10:45).

"The fundamental lesson that greatness comes only by way of servanthood and that first place in leadership is gained only by becoming everybody's slave must have come as a great and unwelcome shock. It is noteworthy that only once did Jesus say that He was leaving His disciples an example, and that was when He washed their feet." [J. Oswald Sanders, DJ #100, p. 59.]

Do you want to be humble? Then don't think too much about yourself and your spiritual abilities.

2. Do Think Rightly About Yourself and God's Gifts

- There is a balance to the first point, and it is that we also don't think only, "I am nothing, I am worthless and empty and of no value..." In one sense, that is true — when we are without Christ, we have no eternal value or righteousness. We *are* destitute and empty — which is where Jesus begins with the gospel (Mt. 5:3).
- But in Christ, we have been given much and provided much (Rom. 8:4a; 2 Cor. 3:5-6; 4:7a)
- So Paul also says, ***think so as to have sound judgment...*** = The word means "reasonable, sensible." This person is "in his right mind." In other words, he has evaluated his position in the church and his spiritual gifts and responsibilities and he thinks rationally and rightly about them.
 - ✓ He accurately evaluates his responsibilities and gifting — "the Lord has placed me with my gifts in the context of this church to help these people — and I can help them..." (*All of us* should think that.)
 - ✓ He does not have a false humility that diminishes the real work of God's grace in his life ("I don't have any gifts; I can't help...") — think with sound judgment ("sober thinking") about God's gift of faith.
- God has saved, freed, redeemed, made holy, secured, empowered, gifted *every* believer for service. That's all part of his work of faith. Don't diminish that work!
- Here is the key — to be humble is to diminish my own abilities, while at the same time exalting the work of God in my life. True humility has an accurate perspective of God's influence in my life.
 - ✓ Imagine a four-year-old who wants to help dad with the lawn. So dad starts up the lawn mower and pushes it while straddling the child who is straining to hold onto the handle and "push" the mower. The job gets awkwardly done in twice the time and the boy exclaims, "Look, Dad, I did it."

- ✓ We do the same when we attempt to take credit for ministry and service ourselves.
- ✓ But we must not diminish that God uses us. He does. Cf. 2 Cor. 9:8; 2 Tim. 2:20-21. We are not perfect vessels, but we are *usable* vessels. And He does use us.
- So let's think about *your* gifts — what has God qualified and equipped you to do? (vv. 7-8; 1 Cor. 12)
 - ✓ You can't do everything, but you can do something (*function*, v. 4)
 - ✓ You can't do it alone, but you can be a part of what God is doing to build His body (v. 5)
 - ✓ You don't have every gift, but you do have some gift(s) (v. 6)
- It is at least weekly that I shake my head in wonder that I get to be a part of this body and that God uses me in small ways to influence people's lives — that thought ought to constantly overwhelm us.

===== || *Do you want to be humble?* ||
 ===== || *Then don't think too much about yourself and your spiritual abilities.* ||
 ===== || *But do think rightly about yourself and God's gift(s) to you.* ||
 =====

3. Do Think and Work Faithfully with Your Gifts

- God's gifts are for FAITHFULNESS in the one church body (v. 3c)
 - ✓ There is a fair amount of debate about what Paul means at the end of verse — **as God has allotted...** In fact, one commentator has suggested there are 70 possible meanings of this concluding phrase!
 - ✓ One main possibility is that God has given the same measure of the faith to all people and we should evaluate ourselves according to our position in the faith and in Christ (e.g., 6:3ff).
 - ✓ Or it could be that God has distributed a variety of gifts in varying amounts to all those who have faith and they should use those gifts as an expression of their faith. The faithful use of our gifts should stimulate unity of the one church of Christ. Each member asks, "How can I make the best use of my gift to benefit and strengthen the church?" I think that's what Paul intends.
 - ✓ Paul makes it pretty clear in the verses that follow about spiritual gifts (vv. 6-8) —
 - Whatever quantity of spiritual gifting God has given you, use it in dependent faith in God, trusting that He will manifest His grace through your exercise of that gift.
 - In other words, be faithful to use the gifts God has given you, trusting that He will use you.
 - A similar idea is expressed by Paul in Eph. 4:7.
- God has given you a spiritual gift. He has carefully measured it out and given it according to His wisdom and all His other provision for you. When you use it, you demonstrate faith in Him.
- God has given you a spiritual gift so we can be faithful to Him. Be faithful to use it in the body of Christ.

- Of course using it in the body means that we need to think rightly about that gift —
 - ✓ The gift is not for me to expend on myself. It's to be used for the benefit of others.
 - ✓ The gift is not dependent on me; it's His gift, so He has to give it.
 - ✓ The gift is just right — God gave it and each of our gifts fit us “just right.” So use your gift.
 - ✓ Working faithfully and humbly doesn't just mean using (only) our gifts; it means doing all the hard things of ministry that come with using our gifts — e.g., **1 Tim. 4:14-16**.
 - ✓ Being humbly faithful means that we will do the things that are contrary to our inclinations because we know that God is glorified when we are obedient.
- God's gifts are **VARIOUS** within the one church body (v. 4)
 - ✓ In v. 4, Paul provides a reason that we should exercise our gifts faithfully — **for...**
 - ✓ He provides the reason by giving an analogy — in our bodies, we all have **many members...** That is, our bodies have many different parts and the parts all have different jobs. That doesn't mean that one part of the body is more necessary than the other; they are all necessary in their own way.
 - ✓ The variety of the church body corresponds to the variety of the physical body. Different parts and functions and gifts do not mean superiority or inferiority — it just means, “different.” Paul makes the same analogy in **1 Cor. 12**, with the conclusion that the variety provides care for all (**12:24-26**).
 - ✓ This is also a reminder that we don't live for ourselves: we live for others. My suffering isn't just about me, my sin isn't just about me, my marriage isn't about me, my role in the church body isn't about me. God has placed me in the body for the benefit of others. I am necessary for you and you are necessary for me — and when we both exercise our gifts in humility, then we all have the care we need.
 - ✓ So in verse four, Paul is reminding us to humbly remember, “I'm just one of many...”
- God's gifts are **UNIFYING** within the one church body (v. 5)
 - ✓ When Paul says **So**, he is bringing this short section to a brief conclusion: there may be **many** of us in the church body, but the body is not about us individually, but about us corporately, the **one**.
 - ✓ We are **one body in Christ**. Christ is one Head and He has only one body, not multiple bodies. He is the unifying reality for the church. He brings us into harmony with Him and with each other. The personal diversity we have is unified through our corporate relationship with Him.
 - ✓ We are tied together not just as a faceless “corporation,” but we are **individually members** of one another — we maintain our individuality, but we also are related to each other member of the church body. I am related to you...and you...and you... And you are related to me... Just as in a marriage, we maintain our personal uniqueness, but the individual ceases to exist and the one whole body supersedes our individuality — so that live harmoniously together sharing common spiritual life, common ministry, common power, and a common Head. It's not about us, but Him.
 - ✓ So v. 4 is a humble reminder “I'm one of many,” and v. 5 humbly reminds, “it's about Christ, not me.”

Do you want to be humble?

Then don't think too much about yourself and your spiritual abilities.

But do think rightly about yourself and God's gift(s) to you.

And do and think and work faithfully with your gifts and in your ministry.

CONCLUSION: Who has influenced you? Who are the people that God has used to shape your life?

What I am spiritually is the amalgamation of parents and SS teachers and VBS and books and a wife and children and professors, but also in large part, you. This church body is one of the fundamental means God has used and is using to conform me to what I am as a follower of Christ. And He has done the same thing for you through your relationships in the church body. We are what we are because of Christ and others and not because of our own efforts. Two final reminders:

- ✓ Realize that God has made you a part of the body of Christ for the purpose of being used by Him to influence lives and build into others. The way that God works in our lives is through the Spirit using the Word and also through the Spirit using Word-filled and Word-controlled believers.
- ✓ Work hard. Part of humility says, “God has given me a gift and it will take much effort to practice that gift, but because He has given it to me, it is worthwhile. I am willing to be humbled by being used up so God’s purposes are accomplished in His church.”

Humility is not the worst thing that has ever happened to us. It may not be easy. But it's good. It's good for me; it's good for you; it's good for the body of Christ; it's good for the glory of God.

We all have an instruction from God — through Paul — not to think disproportionately about our value to God and His work, but to think rightly (and righteously) about God's gifting us and our role in the church body, and consequently (and in faith) we are to exercise the gifts God has given us in the way and for the purpose He has given them to us.

BENEDICTION: Romans 11:33-36