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Enjoying God Ministries  
Romans # 49  
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**You Have a Spiritual Gift: Now Use It!**  
**Romans 12:3-8**

One would be hard-pressed to identify a more controversial subject in Scripture than that of spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. So, today we will closely examine Paul's list of gifts here in vv. 3-8 and spend most of our time on defining what prophecy is and how it operates in the local church.

*How to Think and How not to Think (v. 3)*

Paul has just exhorted all of us to undergo a continual reformation or renewal of our minds lest we be conformed to the standards and values of this fallen world. But in what way should our minds be renewed? How might this renewal or reformation or transformation of our minds display itself? There are undoubtedly any number of ways, but Paul focuses on one in particular here in v. 3.

If there is one mindset prevalent in our world it is *an inflated sense of self-importance*. In a word: *pride!* To counter this tendency that all of us find in our hearts, Paul refers to "thinking" four times in v. 3. You can't see this in the ESV, so here is a more literal rendering of the verse:

"I say to everyone among you not to *think* of himself more highly than he ought to *think*, but to *think* with a view to sober *thinking*."

"Think" in these four instances refers less to intellectual analysis and more to moral evaluation. He's talking about the way we assess ourselves in relation to others. We are always prone to comparison. How do I measure up to Steve? Am I as important as Susan? Are my gifts as noticeable as Mark's? Do people like me more than Ann? Shouldn't I be acknowledged and honored more than David? And on and on it goes.

How do we overcome this tendency to regard ourselves as better and more deserving of recognition than others? By thinking deeply about the fact that who we are and what gifts we possess are both an expression of God's grace to us. All God's children have been given faith. But some have been given more faith than others. Although you might think this defeats Paul's purpose, I don't think it does. In other words, you might want to say that if one Christian has more faith than another, he/she has a reason to think more highly of himself above another. But Paul's point is that regardless of how much faith any believer has, it is a gift of God. God has "assigned" the amount or degree of faith, so no one has any grounds for boasting. You can't boast that you've been given a gift, for a gift is by definition undeserved.

The fact of the matter is that "faith" in the Christian is always subject to growth or loss. Your faith can increase or decrease. Don't ever respond to what Paul says in v. 3 with an attitude of fatalism: "Well, since God gives faith, I will just have to settle for how much I currently have. No reason to pray more or study the Word more." No! Paul commended the Thessalonians when he said, "We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly" (2 Thess. 1:3). All Christians have faith, but not all have it in the same degree. Later in Romans 14:1 Paul will talk about some Christians who are "weak" in faith as opposed to those who are strong. More on this when we get to Romans 14.

If sinful pride is a threat to unity in the church, so too is false humility. If we can think too highly of ourselves, we can also underestimate and undervalue what we can and ought to do. In other words, there are two kinds of people who can ruin a church: (1) those who think too highly of themselves and insert themselves into situations where they don't belong, and (2) those who think too lowly of themselves and

are reluctant to do what God has gifted and called them to do. So, Paul does not say don't think about yourself at all. Just don't think beyond what God has imparted to you nor below. Rather, think soberly and honestly with sound judgment.

### *The Church as a Body of Mutually Interdependent Members (vv. 4-5)*

The Bible doesn't describe the life of the local church as if it were a schoolroom or a corporate office or a playground or an athletic field. The church is a living, functioning, mutually interdependent body (see 1 Cor. 12:12-31; Eph. 4:1-16; Col. 1:18; 3:14-15). How utterly grotesque and distorted and unnatural would it be if I stood before you as one huge mouth? Just a mouth, no eyes, no ears, no arms or legs or knees or fingers, just lips and a tongue flapping along. Just as the human body is comprised of multiple, differing parts, each with its own purpose and function, so too the local church. If we were all the same body parts here at Bridgeway, with everyone doing the same thing in the same way, how utterly boring and ineffective we would be. Here is how Paul said it in greater detail in 1 Corinthians 12:14-20.

(14) For the body does not consist of one member but of many. (15) If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. (16) And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. (17) If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? (18) But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. (19) If all were a single member, where would the body be? (20) As it is, there are many parts, yet one body (1 Cor. 12:14-20).

Look closely at v. 18. If you are inclined to be dissatisfied with your gift, wanting to have some gift that another has, never forget that "God arranged the members of the body, each one of them, *as he chose.*" Are you wiser than God? How dare we question his decision? He knows what is best for us and for the church as a whole and we must submit in humility to the way he has gifted one and not another. Don't ever think that a mistake has been made when it comes to your spiritual gift(s). In his infinite and loving wisdom, God is the one who has determined who receives what, when it comes to spiritual gifts.

Before moving on, I want you to take special note of the concluding phrase in v. 5 – "individually members one of another." I am a member of you and you are a member of me, and we are all members together of one another. Although we "do not all have the same function" (v. 5), who we are and what we experience in the body of Christ can never be attained or known except in mutual interdependence, one with another, exercising our gifts to build up one another. We do not exist solely for ourselves, but for the sake of one another! That is why covenant membership is so important!

### *The Seven Gifts of Romans 12*

Let's be clear about one thing: Spiritual gifts are not favors that God bestows exclusively on pastors and elders. All Christians have received at least one gift and are to serve one another. Furthermore, these gifts are the fruit of God's grace, for Paul declares that they "are according to the grace given to us" (12:6). Spiritual gifts must never be attributed to the moral excellence or performance or worth of human beings. They are the product of the grace of God. This is made clear by noting the words Paul uses: the word "gifts" in v. 6 is *charismata*, from which we get our word "charismatic." And the word for "grace" in v. 6 is *charin*, from *charis*. The point is that spiritual gifts, or *charismata*, are an expression of divine *charis*, or grace. Even Paul's apostolic calling and gift is an expression of God's grace and not a result of his personal accomplishments (see v. 3a).

There is an important principle about spiritual gifts that we see once again here in Romans 12. When Paul speaks of the gifts of serving and giving and showing mercy and exhorting, he is not saying that only some Christians are responsible to engage in these activities. All Christians are to give generously to the support of the church and its ministries. All Christians are to be merciful and should exhort one another to

pursue godly living. The same could be said of the spiritual gift of evangelism (Eph. 4:11). All Christians are called on to share their faith with others.

So why does Paul speak of these as “gifts” given to some but not all? I think Paul is telling us that although all of us are responsible to pursue these activities, there are some in the body of Christ whom God has singled out in a special and unique way and imparted to them an extraordinary measure of the Holy Spirit to exercise these specific ministries. Some people are empowered to show mercy beyond what we might otherwise think is normal. Some give of their financial resources above and beyond what is expected of all of us. Everyone should share the gospel with unbelievers, but some are uniquely called and empowered by the Spirit to do so with special effectiveness and zeal and consistency.

It’s also important to note that many of these gifts overlap with each other. The person who serves is showing mercy and the one showing mercy is serving the person who is in need. The one who teaches is also exhorting and the one who exhorts cannot do so without some measure of teaching. And the one who gives generously is obviously being merciful and serving others by means of his/her financial wealth.

(1) The gift of “service” is the translation of the common term for “ministry” (*diakonia*) that could conceivably be a reference to any or all manner of giving of oneself for the benefit of others. Some believe that it has reference to providing financial or material assistance to those in dire need. Could Paul here have in mind the office of deacon? Possibly, but whereas all deacons serve there is nothing to suggest that *only* deacons serve. Peter likely has in view this same gift when he speaks of serving “in the strength that God supplies” (1 Peter 4:11). Those with the gift of serving see a need, a weakness, a person in crisis, or a task that calls for immediate action, and instantly feel an impulse from the Spirit to step in and devote their energies to helping bring resolution. They typically stay out of the limelight on purpose, preferring to labor anonymously for the sake of those in the body of Christ.

(2) Teaching, as over against prophecy, entails the explanation of tradition that is already written, most likely the OT Scriptures, the words and works of Jesus. It may also include whatever Scripture was already penned and had been recognized as inspired (see 2 Peter 3:15-16). Paul encouraged Timothy to devote himself to other faithful men “who will be able to teach others” (2 Tim. 2:2; cf. 3:10 and Titus 2:1). All elders are to be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9). Whether or not this refers to the spiritual gift of teaching is a point of dispute. Also, whereas all elders must be able to teach, it is hardly the case that *only* elders teach. Women also may receive and utilize this gift (Titus 2:3). Those with this gift are capable of understanding and articulating biblical truth and defending it against the inroads of theological error. A teacher will love to study and is, in most cases, reasonably articulate, at least to the degree that others can follow their instruction and are persuaded of the truth they communicate.

(3) The gift of “exhortation” is often linked with teaching (1 Tim. 4:13; 1 Thess. 2:3), but here probably emphasizes the application of truths communicated in teaching or the passionate urging and encouraging of people to live out what they know to be true. The word used here may even include the idea of appeal, in which truths that are taught are communicated in such a way that a person is called into action and encouraged to apply biblical doctrine in practical ways.

(4) As for “giving” or “contributing,” it is to be done “in (or with) generosity,” although the word here can also mean “simplicity”. If the latter is in view, Paul would have in mind a person who is careful that her motivation is single and spiritual, altogether for the glory of God and the good of the person(s) to whom their giving is directed, as well as devoid of any desire to gain influence or secure power in the church or put people in her debt (see Matt. 6:2-4). On the other hand, “generosity” is in view when the word is used in 2 Cor. 8:2; 9:11, 13. One more thing: It isn’t only wealthy people who have this gift!

(5) The one who “leads” likely has in view administrative oversight (see 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:4,5,12; 5:17). It should be carried out with diligence, not laziness. Since Paul does not specify over whom or what one would lead, we should not restrict this gift to those who are elders or pastors. Although elders in

the local church assuredly lead (see 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17), one need not be an elder in order to possess and faithfully and fruitfully exercise this gift.

(6) The gift of “mercy” finds expression in any number of contexts, but probably has in view ministry to the sick or those who are discouraged and depressed, perhaps even suffering economic hardship. Those with this gift typically are deeply compassionate and empathize with those who are suffering. Paul encourages them to fulfill this ministry “with cheerfulness,” a word that he also employs in 2 Corinthians 9:7 to emphasize the proper attitude in our financial stewardship. One must display mercy joyfully, not begrudgingly or reluctantly, as if one were discharging a debt or acting solely from a sense of moral duty. If you want to know what the gift of mercy looks like, envision in your mind a picture of Eddy Helker.

### *The Importance of Prophecy in the Life of the Local Church*

Some of you may be wondering if I’m placing too much of an emphasis on the spiritual gift of prophecy. I don’t believe I am, and here is why.

**First**, we know from the events on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 that Peter, quoting the words of the OT prophet Joel, described the entire present church age in which we live as one that will be *characterized* by the gift of prophecy among all of God’s people.

“And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18).

All NT scholars agree that the words “the last days” is a reference to the entire present church age in which we live, the age spanning the gap between the first coming of Christ and his second coming at the end of history (see 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:1-2; 9:26; James 5:3; 1 Peter 1:20; 1 John 2:18; cf. also 1 Cor. 10:11; 1 Tim. 4:1). Of all the things that Peter could have said about the present church age, he mentions the gift of prophecy operating at all levels and ages and among both genders.

It is during this present church age that the Spirit will be poured out “on all flesh,” that is to say, not just kings and prophets and priests but on every child of God: every man and woman, every son and daughter, young and old (see Acts 2:17). Peter’s (and Joel’s) language is unmistakable when it comes to this New Covenant universalizing of the Spirit’s empowering presence: “all flesh” (v. 17), i.e., irrespective of age (“old men” and “young men”), gender (“sons” and “daughters” and “male servants” and “female servants”), social rank (“servants”), or race (“all flesh”; cf. v. 39; i.e., both Jew and Gentile).

I need to explain my use of the word “characterize” when I speak of prophecy in the church age. This is justified in light of Peter’s reference to the “last days”. Some have tried to argue that the events that occurred on the Day of Pentecost in the first century were designed solely to launch or inaugurate or in some sense jump-start the age of the New Covenant. Now, make no mistake, the coming of the Spirit in power on Pentecost most assuredly did inaugurate the New Covenant age in which we now live. But what the Spirit did on that day centuries ago is also designed by God to characterize the experience of God’s people throughout the course of this age until Jesus comes back. In other words, what we are reading in Acts 2:17-21 is a description of what the Holy Spirit does in and through and on behalf of God’s people throughout the entire course of this present age. Simply put, prophecy, whatever it may mean, is designed by God to be normative for all God’s people in this age in which we live, as we await the return of the Lord.

**Second**, of all the spiritual gifts that Paul tells us to earnestly desire and seek, he singles out prophecy as the most important.

“Pursue love, and earnestly desire spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:1).

“So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues” (1 Cor.14:39).

**Third**, there are four places where numerous spiritual gifts are listed, and the only gift that appears in every one of them is prophecy (see Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 12:28-30; Ephesians 4:11).

**Fourth**, note that Paul specifically identifies the despising of prophetic utterances to be quenching of the Holy Spirit.

“Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast to what is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess. 5:19-22).

**Fifth**, consider how important Paul believed prophecy to be in the life of his spiritual son Timothy.

“This charge, I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience” (1 Tim. 1:18-19).

Prophecy is to be exercised “in proportion to our faith” (v. 6). I believe Paul is talking about the personal faith of the prophet. Not all who prophesy do so with the same degree of confidence that they have truly heard the voice of the Spirit. In other words, there will always be greater and lesser degrees of prophetic ability and consequently greater and lesser degrees of prophetic accuracy (which, it seems reasonable to assume, may increase or decrease, depending on the circumstances of that person's life). Thus, the prophet is to speak in proportion to the confidence and assurance he/she has that what he says is truly of God. Prophets are not to speak beyond what God has revealed; they must be careful never to speak on their own authority or from their own resources.

### *Prophecy and Revelation*

The foundation or basis of all prophetic ministry is the *revelatory* work of the Spirit. In other words, prophecy is always the communication of something the Holy Spirit has “revealed” or disclosed to a person. In Acts 2 this revelatory work of the Spirit is expressed in dreams and visions (Acts 2:18). In Corinthians 14:26 Paul says that when Christians “come together” for a corporate assembly, “each one has a hymn, a lesson, a *revelation*, a tongue, or an interpretation” (emphasis mine). Later, in 14:30, Paul makes it clear that a person prophesies only upon reception of a spontaneous revelation from the Spirit. I use the word “spontaneous” in this case because Paul envisions “a revelation” coming to someone sitting in the meeting while yet another has already begun to speak.

Evangelicals often have a knee-jerk reaction to the use of the word *revelation* based on the mistaken assumption that all divine revelation is canonical. The idea that God might still be providing his people with “revelation” of any sort is thought to suggest, if not require, a repudiation of the notion that what we have already received in canonical and inspired form in the Bible is sufficient. If God has supplied us in Scripture itself with everything necessary for life and godliness, what need would there be for him to reveal anything beyond what we already possess?

Part of the problem is in the way that we employ the term “revelation” and the verb “to reveal.” The verb “to reveal” (*apokaluptō*) occurs 26x in the NT and the noun “revelation” occurs 18x. In every relevant instance the reference is to divine activity; never to human communication. However, ***not every act of divine revelation is equal in authority***. The tendency among some is to improperly assume that any time a “revelation” is granted it bears the same universally binding authority, sufficient to warrant its inclusion in the biblical canon. But divine “revelation” comes in a variety of different forms. For example, consider Paul’s statement in Philippians 3:15. There were present in Philippi some who took issue with certain elements in Paul’s teaching. He appeals to all who are “mature” to “think” as he does. If some do not,

Paul is confident that “God will reveal” to them the error of their way and bring them into conformity with apostolic truth. We see from a text like this that God can “reveal” to a Christian or in some manner disclose to their minds truths that no one would ever regard as canonical or bearing the authoritative weight of inspired biblical texts. The Spirit, instead, would bring something to mind spontaneously, some insight or truth designed exclusively for them and never intended by God to be taken as universally authoritative or binding on the conscience of other believers.

Jesus employed the verb “to reveal” to describe his own gracious activity in making known the Father to those who previously had no saving knowledge of him (Matt. 11:25-27). But surely no one would insist that the insight given to such folk should be written down and preserved as canonical for subsequent generations of Christians. Paul again uses the language of “revelation” to describe the activity of God in making known the reality of divine wrath against those “who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18). Thus, God’s act of divine disclosure is again unrelated to the inspiration of texts that carry an intrinsic authority.

### *Defining Prophecy*

We’re now able to define prophecy more specifically as ***the speaking forth in merely human words something the Holy Spirit has sovereignly and often spontaneously revealed to a believer***. Prophecy, therefore, is not based on a hunch, a supposition, an inference, an educated guess, or even on sanctified wisdom. Prophecy is not based on personal insight, intuition, or illumination. Prophecy is the human *report* of a divine *revelation*. This is what distinguishes prophecy from teaching. Teaching is always based on a text of Scripture. Prophecy is always based on a spontaneous revelation.

### *Who Can Prophesy?*

There is nothing in Scripture to indicate that the gift of prophecy is gender specific. In fact, there are several texts that explicitly speak of women prophesying to the edification of other believers (see Acts 2:17-18; 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:2-16). This does not necessarily mean that everyone, both male and female, will in fact prophesy. As Paul makes clear to us, not all are prophets (1 Cor. 12:29). At the same time, he expresses his desire that “all” would prophesy (1 Cor. 14:5) because “the one who prophesies builds up (edifies) the church” (1 Cor. 14:4). In two other texts he seems to envision the possibility that any Christian might speak prophetically (1 Cor. 14:24,31). But again, we shouldn’t conclude from this that everyone will. My sense is that Paul is drawing a distinction between, on the one hand, “prophets” who consistently display a facility and accuracy in this gift and, on the other, those who merely on occasion “prophesy”. Thus, not all will be “prophets” (cf. Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:29), but it would appear that all *may* prophesy.

A few words about how we pastor the prophetic on Sunday morning at Bridgeway . . .

### *The Content of Prophetic Words*

What might God disclose that would serve as the basis for prophetic utterances? The Scriptures provide us with few examples, but among them are: revealing the “secrets” of the unbeliever’s heart (1 Cor. 14:24-25), and a warning about impending persecution (Acts 21:4,10-14). It may be that the Spirit would bring to mind a Scripture passage that applies especially at a particular moment in time to a person’s life. Paul explicitly states that whatever form prophetic revelation might take, it will typically serve to exhort, edify, and console another person (1 Cor. 14:3). In Acts 13:1-3 it appears that a prophetic word served to disclose the Spirit’s will for the ministry of Saul and Barnabas. As Paul was preaching, he was the recipient of a revelation that a paralyzed man had the sort of faith that would lead to healing (Acts 14:9-10). And it would appear that it was by means of a prophetic revelation that Timothy received a spiritual gift (1 Tim. 4:14).

I see no reason why we should limit the range of prophetic activity to these few examples. The Spirit could conceivably make use of this gift to accomplish any number of goals. Although some believe the incident in Acts 5 is an example of a word of knowledge, it is just as likely that the Spirit's revelation to Peter of the heart motivation in both Ananias and Sapphira was the basis for his prophetic discipline that ensued.

#### *What is the Purpose of Prophecy?*

Paul says prophecy *builds up (edifies), encourages, and consoles* (1 Cor. 14:3). However, this may refer to the "results" of prophecy rather than its exclusive purpose. In any case, when people are suddenly confronted with the inescapable reality that God truly knows their hearts and has heard their prayers and is intimately acquainted with all their ways, they are encouraged to press on and to persevere. We have often spoken with believers who, in spite of what they knew theologically to be true, *felt* as if God had forgotten them. Their prayers seemed never to be heard, much less answered. Then, often quite without warning, they receive a prophetic word from a total stranger that could be known only by God himself, and their faith is bolstered and their spirit consoled.

Prophecy can also function to disclose the secrets of the hearts of the unbelieving, leading them to repentance and faith in Christ (1 Cor. 14:24-25). On occasion, a prophetic word can provide us with specific guidance on when to go, where to go, and with whom to go (we see this in Acts 13:1-3; 16:6-10). While God can make use of a prophetic revelation to guide and direct us, prophecy is not the primary means by which we make decisions in the Christian life. The prophetic gift can also provide us with the resources to wage war against Satan and the flesh and to encourage us in the Christian life (1 Tim. 1:18-19).

#### *The Responsibility of All to "Judge/Weigh/Assess" Prophetic Words*

When someone delivers a prophetic word, all others are never to remain passive, but are exhorted to test or judge what is said. We see this in 1 Corinthians 14:29 and 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 (cf. 1 John 4:1ff.). The criteria of judgment include, among others: (1) consistency with Scripture; (2) potential to edify and encourage (1 Cor. 14:3); (3) love (1 Cor. 13); (4) personal experience (Acts 20:22-23; 21:3-4, 10-14); (5) the character and motivation of the one who prophesies.

In conclusion, no one can easily dismiss the importance of prophecy or the biblical obligation each of us has to earnestly desire it and pursue it (1 Cor. 14:1, 39).