

Talents Romans 12:3-8

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We're into the second week of our series on stewardship.  
Time, talents and treasure.  
Last week we looked at time,  
and we were encouraged  
to make the most of every opportunity that God sends along.

Today we look at talents.

The Bible actually has a lot to say  
about how Christians use their talents.

It's quite a focus of NT writing.

Why is that?

Why does God care how we use our talents?

Could it be that God wants to get some things done,  
and he couldn't possibly get them done  
without relying on our amazing capabilities?

Nope, I don't think that's it.

However talented you are,  
and I'm sure you are incredibly talented,  
God can do it better than you can.

Are you good at arranging flowers for church on Sunday?

Go up and have a look at God's flower arrangements  
in the desert after it's rained.

Trust me, God is a good flower arranger.

He doesn't need your help.

Are you brilliantly talented at music?

Have a listen to the song of the nightingale.

Trust me, God doesn't need your musical help.

So why does God have an interest in our meagre talents?

Well the interesting answer is that God wants his church to be united.  
I bet you weren't expecting that.

You see, the main passages in the NT where it talks about spiritual gifts  
are all in the context of Christian unity.

Let me back up a little.  
I started talking about talents.  
I've suddenly switched to spiritual gifts.  
But actually the NT never uses the word 'talent' to describe our abilities.  
You might have heard of the parable of the 'talents'.  
That's got nothing to do with our abilities.  
It's a unit of money.  
A talent of gold was around 33kg.  
But when it comes to talking of our abilities,  
the NT uses the language of spiritual gifts.  
It underlines a couple of things for us.  
1. They are spiritual.  
You didn't get your abilities for your own enjoyment.  
You got them for the spiritual purpose of building up God's church.  
2. They are gifts.  
You didn't get your abilities because you are such great person.  
You got them because God is kind.  
Kind to his church.  
So he gave his church the gifts  
that would make it strong in bear witness to our Lord Jesus.  
So in this sermon,  
although we've called it talents,  
so we can have the nice T alliteration of time, talents and treasure,  
what we are actually talking about is spiritual gifts.

So there are three main passages that talk about spiritual gifts:  
Romans 12, 1 Cor 12 and Eph 4.  
Today we're just looking at Romans 12.  
But all three passages share something in common.  
They are all passages that are speaking of our Christian unity.  
Romans and 1 Cor both use the metaphor  
of the body with its different parts.  
The body metaphor is about unity  
because a body doesn't work unless its parts work together.  
Eph 4 is about unity explicitly.

It says, 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.'

And then it gives this great list of 'ones' to emphasise our unity. One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one baptism, one God.

So three passages about spiritual gifts, and at their heart they are all about Christian unity.

Why does God give us abilities?

I think it's because we are all so headstrong.

We all have such a tendency to go our own way.

And our abilities are given to us so we will need to rely on each other.

The great temptation in human history has been pride: thinking that we can do it ourselves.

But when different people have different gifts, we ought to be able to recognise that we need each other.

I don't have an aesthetic bone in my body.

Various times in church people will ask me about some aesthetic question.

Do you think we should have the banners here or there?

Do you think the Christmas tree looks good like this or that?

My answer is invariably the same.

"I don't have an opinion.

You need to ask someone who cares about what things look like.

Do I look like I have fashion sense, honestly?"

And yet I know that it does matter.

It might not matter to me.

But for many people aesthetics do matter.

And so we need people in the church with those gifts, so we can care for the sensibilities of those for whom aesthetics matter.

Here's the important bit.

I'm dependent on other people at this point.

I could try as hard as I liked,

I couldn't do it myself.

It's just not the way God has wired me.

But God has sent us Evelyn,

and she can make things look good.  
God gives us spiritual gifts  
so that we will all be dependent on each other.  
We will all need each other  
because we can't do it alone.  
Spiritual gifts help me get on top off my sinful pride.  
Not when I think about my own gifts,  
but when I think about your gifts.  
Because then I know that I need you.

Robbie Boer put a dynabolt in the ground  
so we could lock up our nice new bbq last week.  
Greg and Werner bought the nice new bbq from somewhere,  
Bunnings maybe?  
I couldn't have bought a nice new bbq because I don't have a trailer.  
I couldn't get the nice new bbq out of the church office,  
because I couldn't install a dynabolt to lock it to.  
I don't even know what a dynabolt is,  
I'm just using the word  
to try to sound like I know what I'm talking about.  
The point is we need each other.  
We are helpless without one another.  
And Spiritual gifts teach us that.

So Paul begins today's reading with these words, Rom 12:3  
"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought,  
but rather think of yourself with sober judgement,  
in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you."  
You've heard of low self esteem, right.  
In the secular world, it's the big problem that will damage people.  
And it is a problem.  
There are people in our church with low self esteem.  
It's often associated with abusive relationships.  
But there's another problem out there.  
It's called high self esteem.

I bet no one ever told you that was a problem.  
"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought."  
High self esteem or what the Bible calls pride is a big problem.  
It's a problem in our relationships with others.  
It's very hard to get along with other people  
if you think that you are better than they are  
and that everything has to be done your way.  
It's a problem in our relationship with God.  
It's very hard to admit you need forgiveness,  
if you are full of pride.  
What's the solution?  
Think of yourself with sober judgement.  
That doesn't mean judgement unclouded by the demon drink.  
It means serious contemplation  
about where you stand before a holy God.  
Consider yourself in accordance with the Christian faith.  
What does the Christian faith tell you?  
It tells you that you are a sinner saved by grace.

Turn to your neighbour and tell them.  
"I am a sinner saved by grace."  
That's the cure for pride.

In verse 4-5,  
Paul continues with the body metaphor.  
We use some of these words in our communion service.  
"We who are many are one body in Christ."  
You might be the arm and I might be the leg.  
But we can't actually get along too far without each other.  
It would be no good an arm getting all full of pride  
about what a wonderful job it does bowling a cricket ball or something.  
It needs the leg to run up to the wicket.  
The body metaphor tells us that we all depend on each other.  
There's no possible justification  
for thinking of yourself more highly than you ought.

You can't do anything without the other members of the body.  
But Paul even says more than that.  
v5 "Each member belongs to all the others."  
Not only do we need each other.  
We belong to each other.  
That's probably a shock to you, in our fiercely independent culture.  
But you belong to other people.  
People some of whom you may not know too well.  
They own you.  
Turn to your neighbour and tell them,  
"I belong to you."  
Was that a bit weird?  
But you see those are Paul's last words  
before he spells out the spiritual gifts of the church.  
If the other members of your church own you,  
then you have no more right to tell them  
they have no call on your spiritual gift,  
than they have a right to tell you that you can't drive your car.  
You own it, of course you can drive it.  
They own you,  
of course they can rely on you  
to use your spiritual gifts for their benefit.

So what are the spiritual gifts.  
Well I mentioned  
that there are lists of spiritual gifts in other places in the NT.  
The interesting thing is that in every case the lists are quite different.  
What I think we should take from that  
is that these lists are not meant to be exhaustive.  
There are many ways to bless the body of Christ.  
And we shouldn't exclude some way of serving,  
just because it doesn't feature on a list.

That said, we do notice some features  
that unify the gifts here and in the other places.

These gifts are spiritual gifts.

The gifts listed here are:

prophecy, serving, teaching,  
encouraging, giving, leading and showing mercy.

Do you notice that these are all about relationships  
not about being good at some technical skill?

You prophesy to proclaim God's word so that people might be edified.

You serve to assist other members of the church.

You teach so that people might grow in their knowledge of God.

You encourage to spur others on to know and serve God.

You give to bless the poor

and enable those who don't know Christ to hear the good news.

You lead so that God's people can work together in unity  
as they live for his kingdom.

You show mercy to bind up the broken hearted.

These spiritual gifts are all focused on other people.

There's nothing mentioned about playing the piano,  
or putting in a dynabolt or arranging the flowers.

Now I'll admit straight away,

that because the early church didn't have property,  
they wouldn't have been driving in dynabolts.

And I presume that when churches met in people's homes,  
that the owner of the home would put flowers in a vase  
if that was going to be done.

But I still think it's significant that everything Paul mentions  
is focused on building other people up in their relationship with God.

That's the essence of a spiritual gift.

It's about helping people in their relationship with God.

Now of course that might happen a bit indirectly.

You might make a cuppa for people after church.

How does that help them in their relationship with God?

Well it doesn't directly.

There's nothing about drinking tea or coffee  
that directly improves your relationship with God.

Otherwise I'd be missing out big time.  
But creating an environment  
where people can develop strong friendships  
with their Christian brothers and sisters.  
Well of course that is most important in building up God's kingdom.  
Maybe we should rename our morning tea roster the  
'creating an environment where people can develop strong friendships'  
roster.

Playing the guitar is the same.  
There's nothing intrinsic to the guitar  
that helps people climb the stairway to heaven.  
Sorry about that, Led Zeppelin.  
But if you are creating an environment  
where God's people are helped to sing his praises,  
Now that is building the kingdom.  
Maybe we should call our musicians,  
'those who assist the congregation in praise'.  
And as a musician myself,  
I can tell you that musicians have a tendency  
to think that it's about them.  
Whatever your spiritual gift,  
it's not about you.  
It's about building up the body.  
If you are not doing it thinking about how you can build up the body,  
then the chances are you shouldn't be doing it.  
And if you think the body gets built up  
when they recognise just how brilliantly you are doing your job,  
chances are you are kidding yourself.  
The body is built up when the members are enabled  
to speak out their own praises.

The last thing about our spiritual gifts I want to mention  
is how we use them.  
For three of the gifts mentioned here in Romans,

Paul gives some instruction about how they are to be used.  
If your gift is giving, give generously.  
If your gift is leading, lead diligently.  
If your gift is showing mercy, do it cheerfully.  
The word translated 'generously'  
means single mindedly, without ulterior motives.  
It strikes me that generously is perhaps not the best translation.  
If you are told to give generously,  
you usually think that means give lots.  
But in this case it's about the heart.  
We sing the song 'Undivided',  
which says 'Give me an undivided heart'.  
It's tempting when you give,  
to do it because you want to be praised or thanked.  
It's tempting when you give  
to want to get some extra power or influence.  
How should we give?  
Just to be a blessing.  
Because we love God and want to bless his family.  
That has to be our reason.

If your gift is leading, lead diligently.  
For those who are not used to leading,  
it might surprise you to discover  
that leadership is a heavy weight to carry.  
We hear stories about politicians getting their holidays paid for  
by grateful companies who have been given government contracts.  
And we think that leadership is a gravy train.  
But leadership is actually a heavy responsibility.  
Often it comes without perks.  
And often it takes a heavy personal toll.  
For starters, you have to listen to people  
complain about decisions you've made every single day.  
If you are a political leader,  
you have to read about people's complaints in the newspaper

every single day.

And those complaining never know the full circumstances.

Mostly they are armchair experts

who have never led anything themselves.

Sometimes that causes leaders to disengage.

They think to themselves,

"I'm over this.

Why should I care anymore?"

And they take the path of least resistance in leadership.

If you are in Christian leadership,

this temptation must be strenuously avoided.

The spiritual gift of leadership comes from God.

The people you are leading are God's children.

If you are serving God,

you need to do it diligently.

If your gift is showing mercy,

there's a temptation that comes with that too.

When you've heard the sob stories for the 100th time,

they can start to wear a bit thin.

Why don't these people do something themselves?

Why do they always expect to be bailed out?

Haven't they learned anything from last time?

If I keep helping them,

aren't I reinforcing a culture of dependence?

Some of these questions have merit.

But the answer is not to harden your heart.

The opposite of cheerful is grudging.

Romans says,

"If your gift is to show mercy,

do it cheerfully."

That means don't do it grudgingly.

Show mercy cheerfully.

Well it's time to finish up.

What have we learned about our talents today?  
Our talents are actually spiritual gifts.  
Spiritual gifts are given to the church to unify us.  
When we recognise our dependence on each other,  
then we know we need each other.  
Spiritual gifts are given  
so that we can build one another up in relationships.  
And Spiritual gifts are to be used with the right heart.  
Without ulterior motives; diligently and cheerfully.  
Let's pray that we would have the right heart  
as we think about our spiritual gifts.