

THE BODY AT WORK

by: Ray C. Stedman

INTRODUCTION:

When we come to the twelfth chapter of Romans, we come to the second major division of this book.

The first eleven chapters are all devoted to what a Christian life is, and, as we have seen, it is a radically new life. It isn't an improvement of the old life in any degree at all; it isn't taking a man who has certain longings for being a bit better and helping him along until he lives a cleaner or a more moral life. It is cutting off entirely of the old life, whatever its manifestation may be, and the beginning of a new life in Jesus Christ which we continually appropriate -- like we breath fresh air -- by continual expectation. Just as when you take a breath you expect the oxygen to be there, so a Christian learns to depend on the indwelling life of Christ in exactly the same way. Every step he takes he expects Christ to operate, and to empower him, that it may be effective.

Now, in coming to Romans 12 and the rest of the letter, we are coming to that which describes how the Christian life looks when it comes contact with the world. This is a very practical section and one that I think that we will get a great deal out of because of its practicality. In this section we see Christian living coming in contact with society, with the ordinary, work-a-day world. It begins with the church, then goes to government, and then to society in general -- considering the special problems that arise out of it. So this is a very practical section.

As you have noticed from our last study in Romans 12, the first two verses indicate that the application of Christian living starts with a surrendered will: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice," as Paul puts it. This is another expression for the acceptance of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in your life -- a willingness to seek his advancement rather than your own. This is the heart of all Christian experience. A Christian is one who recognizes the authority of Jesus Christ and loves to put himself under his control.

Somebody has well said that there are only two kinds of people in the world. There are those who wake up in the morning and say, "Good morning, Lord," and those who wake up in the morning and say, "Good Lord, its morning!"

This recognition of the immediacy of Jesus Christ all through the day, and through all of life, is the mark of a genuine Christian life. The evidence of a surrendered will, as we saw last week, is *an available body* .

Yesterday I was with 200 men up above Los Angeles, and, among other things, we discussed this very matter. One man stated it very accurately: "If I talk about being a Christian, and about serving the Lord, but I never *do* anything for him, I am just kidding myself."

The evidence of a surrendered life is an available body, a willingness:

- To help,
- To put yourself out,
- To be expendable,
- To respond to the needs about you.

Therefore, a Christian with a continual excuse for doing nothing is deceiving himself about his surrendered will and is resisting the rightful control of God in his life.

THE BODY AT WORK:

This is where we start in Romans 12, and the first place where this activity of service becomes visible is naturally in *the church itself* -- in the body of Christ, in the community of believers, in the circle of God's family. This is where Paul begins in Verses 3-13 of Chapter 12.

We are not going to take all of it this morning, but I'll give you this little preview of it: He speaks about two things, activity and attitude. We are going to look at the activity this morning -- the great question of the spiritual gifts that God gives his own to minister in the body of Christ. He says only two things about these. He says:

1. Don't try to do everything, and
2. Whatever you are given to do, do it wholeheartedly.

The first is the measure of our ability, the second is the mark of our genuineness.

The Measure of our Ability:

Now let's look at these. First, the measure of our ability:

For by the grace given to me I bid 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 which God has assigned him. For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. {Rom 12:3-5 RSV}

This is a picture of life in the body of Christ, the church. It is made up of all believers who share the life of Jesus Christ, and it is a living organism in the world today. When you begin to discover the true power of a Christian, as we have looked at it in Chapters 1-11 of this great letter, you discover that a remarkable thing begins to happen. I don't think the Christian life is worth a 'snap of the finger' if something exciting isn't happening from time to time. It really never begins for us until we begin to see that God intends to work through us individually, and that, when God is at work, things begin to happen. It isn't always some spectacular, outward display -- but things take place.

Andrew Carey Bible Class:

I was privileged to speak at a Bible class in the home of Andrew Carey, the third baseman of the Dodgers baseball team, in Newport Beach last Thursday night. There were about 35-40 people at the class, which was begun by Lloyd and Jackie Johnson, who used to be here with us. Lloyd is the regular teacher of the class, but I taught it this one Thursday night.

Jackie Johnson and a friend of hers picked me up in Los Angeles and drove me out to Newport Beach, and, on the way, they were telling me what had been going on in that class. They got so excited they kept turning around and talking to me -- even though one was trying to drive. So, I finally suggested that I do the driving and let them talk, because they were so excited over what God was doing in their midst in that class.

Now, that is as it should be. This is the kind of excitement that prevails whenever God the Holy Spirit is at work.

Life Becomes an Exciting Thing:

Once you discover this, as a result of the availability of the life-changing, transforming character of Christ dwelling in us, life becomes an exciting thing. You can hardly sleep at night, at times. When you experience that thrill, you begin to want to do everything -- you want to do it all yourself! You see how wonderfully God can work and you think, "There is nothing that I can't do!"

It is at this point that we must begin to realize what Paul brings out here:

- That we are members of a body, and
- It isn't given to each member of the body to do everything that the body does.

There is a division of labor within the church of Christ, and other members of the body are filled with the Spirit too, and need to be exercised.

When Peter Learned This:

Do you remember when Peter learned this? You recall that, after the resurrection, when Peter had denied the Lord and wept bitterly in the streets of Jerusalem, the Lord Jesus met him in Galilee beside the sea on a beautiful morning {see John 21:15-23}.

He had spread a breakfast of fish for them -- broiled fish on the coals -- and, after breakfast, he turned to Peter, and said to him, "Peter, do you love me?" And Peter, who had been so boastful in the Upper Room, could only hang his head and say, "Lord, thou knowest." And again the question came, "Peter, do you love me?" Three times the Lord asked, "Peter, do you love me?" And Peter was driven, at last, to the only recourse, the only ground upon which he had to stand -- not his own energy or ability -- to say, "Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you." And then the Lord gave him his job; he said to him, "Peter, I want you to feed my sheep. Your job is to minister to those who belong to me -- to teach them, to feed them, to nurture their life along. This is your job."

But Peter still had some of old Peter in him. He turned to the Lord, and looking at John, he said to the Lord, "Lord, what do you want that man to do?" If you read the Scriptures carefully, you'll notice that there is indication of jealousy between Peter and John before the crucifixion. Peter evidently resented the fact that John was the one who was always leaning on the Lord's breast, and he was jealous. So, he turned to the Lord and asked this question.

The Lord's answer was quick and to the point. He said to Peter, "What is that to thee?" That is, "That is none of your business, Peter. You follow me. I'll give him a job to do."

There Peter learned that the body has many members, and all do not have the same function, but all of the functions are necessary to the life of the body.

All of Us will Discover This:

All of us will discover this. God gives us gifts, but we do not *all* have the same gifts. We need one another. We are members one with another, not just of this church, but of other churches, other denominations, other groups as well. Nothing is more heartening today than to see how the Spirit of God is breaking down denominational lines all over the country, and around the world, making people aware of how much we need each other in the body of Christ.

Spiritual Gifts:

Here we come to this question of the distribution of spiritual gifts, and I think, in many ways, no question is more discussed and more appropriate than this today. The Lord, we are told, distributes gifts as he wills. That is, it is the prerogative of the head of the body. Whenever our bodies function, they never take orders from the hand or the foot -- they take them from the head.

It is the head that sends down messages; it isn't our fingers that operate on their own. You put your finger on a hot stove and a message runs up your arm and travels right up to the head that says, "It's hot down here." And the finger does nothing more about it yet; it stays right there on the hot stove until the message comes back from the head that says, "Get out of there!" Then the hand moves.

It is the head, you see, that directs the action of the body. This is what we need to remember in the body of Christ. It is the prerogative of the head to give the gifts as he wills.

There are many who are being urged to seek some gift today. Never once in Scripture is there any exhortation to seek gifts. Oh, I know that it says in First Corinthians to "covet the best gifts" {cf, 1 Cor 12:31}, but the pronoun that is used there in the Greek is plural. It means "pray or covet that there be manifest in the entire assembly the better gifts of the Spirit" -- not for any individual to seek any gift for himself. I think it is very essential to understand this.

Now, what is a spiritual gift? Let me give you a definition, if I may. I have been struggling with this, and trying to think it through, and this is the definition that I have come up with:

A spiritual gift is a divinely-given capacity for service.

Now, I did not say that it is a divinely given ability, because *ability* suggests *power* and a spiritual gift does not have anything to do with the power of it. Power can be from one of two sources: The power can either be the power of the Holy Spirit allowing that gift to be used, or it can be the power of the flesh, and the energy of the flesh, even though the gift is given by God. It is a capacity to receive power to exercise a certain ministry -- that is the spiritual gift.

Illustration:

I think I can illustrate that to you:

Suppose I had here a number of electrical appliances -- a toaster, an iron, an electric fan, a hair dryer, and a few other gadgets such as we have abundantly available today. Each of them is designed to do a different thing, each has a different function, but they all used the same power -- and unless they are connected to that power, they are useless.

This is the way with the spiritual gift -- it is a divinely-given capacity to receive power. However, that power can be:

1. The power of the Holy Spirit so that the gift is exercised in such a way as to bless, to minister, to help, and to advance the cause of God,

or it can be:

2. The power of the flesh so that the gift is exercised in such a way as to destroy, to injure, to divide, and to sever.

This is one of the areas that is so misunderstood today. We are talking about spiritual gifts, and among them the gift of tongues and the interpretation of tongues in which we see a revival of interest today. But people forget that the gift of tongues can be exercised in the flesh as well as in the Spirit, and we need to make that distinction clear. I am glad that this passage in Romans 12 deals with the matter of spiritual gifts but never even mentions the gift of tongues, yet it is an authentic and accurate listing (even though partial) of the gifts of the Spirit.

Recognizing Spiritual Gifts:

How do we recognize the gifts of the Spirit that are given to us?

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, the moment that you were born again, God gave you gifts.

Notice that I do not use the singular word. I don't say "gift" -- I say "gifts." I hear people talking about how to discover the gift God has given them. I think we are short-changing God when we talk that way.

Have you ever noticed the liberality with which God gives? He just pours out his gifts. Just think of the number of flowers in the world, the billions of stars in space, the abundance with which God gives, the

lavishness with which he gives gifts!

I don't think that any Christian possesses just one niggardly gift of the Spirit; I think that all of us have several. And we need to discover what they are, and begin to use them. Paul gives us the way to discover the measure of our gift, the measure of our ability. He says it is "according to your faith" -- the measure of the gift is your faith. In other words, that is what Jesus said when he said to his disciples, "According to your faith be it done unto you," {cf, Matt 9:29}. That is, "What do you believe that God can do through you?" ***Start there!*** What challenge of the Spirit lies before you at the moment that you really believe God can do through you? Start right there! When you start there, you will discover that gradually there comes a broadening and a widening of the knowledge of what gifts you have. This is why Paul writes to Timothy, and says, "Stir up the gift that is in you which was given unto you," {cf, 2 Tim 1:6}. That is, get busy and use it! And when you start with what you have, usable for God, you discover more.

Philip, the Evangelist:

There is one man in the New Testament whose gift is always associated with his name. Do you remember who it is? Haven't you ever heard of Philip, the evangelist? He didn't start out as Philip, the evangelist; he started out as Philip, the deacon. A deacon was not a highly honored, highly paid individual in the New Testament. In the sixth chapter of Acts, a deacon was a man who had the job of dividing up the common provender among the squabbling group of quarreling widows. That is where he started, for he had a gift for service -- Philip, the server. And, when he was faithful there, he discovered that God had also given him another gift, that of an evangelist. It is that by which we know him.

The Place to Start:

This is the place to start -- begin where you are. What can God do through you? Begin there!

Don't wait for a call. You don't need a call.

Gifts are given to you by the Spirit immediately upon your conversion, and, no matter how humble a place it is, begin there. Make your body available for the ministry of this gift, and, as you faithfully follow through, you will discover other gifts that are also yours. And you can rejoice in the ministry of others as well.

The Mark of Genuineness of a Gift:

In the second part of this section, Paul brings before us the mark of genuineness of a gift:

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. {Rom 12:6-8 RSV}

This is a partial list of spiritual gifts. There are others that are listed in Ephesians 4 -- evangelists, prophets, pastors, teachers, apostles -- and in First Corinthians 12. But let's look at this list that Paul gives here to the Roman church:

The Gift of Prophecy:

There is, first of all, the gift of prophecy.

Now, that does not mean prediction. That isn't the ability to predict some event that is yet in the future, but it is really the gift of preaching -- of being able to proclaim truth with a powerful effect upon the hearers.

Do you have the gift of prophecy?

It isn't confined only to those who are pastors by any means. There are many laymen who have the gift of

prophecy too. The gift of being able to speak so that you put forth the truth in a powerful way: That is the gift of prophecy.

Others may be helpful in helping you determine whether you have this gift, because sometimes we don't always recognize it in ourselves. Dr. Ironside used to speak of those who thought they had the gift of preaching but to whom nobody had the gift of listening. Now, that is a tragedy.

But the gift of prophecy is a God-given capacity to receive power in preaching. Though it can be exercised in the flesh (and what a deadly thing it is when a preacher preaches in the energy of the flesh), it can also be exercised rightly in the power of the Spirit.

The Gift of Service:

Next, there is the marvelous gift of service. This is what is called "the gift of helps" in First Corinthians 12.

This is the ability to see things that need to be done, and do them -- that is all. What a blessed gift that is!

I thank God for those who have the gift of service here in this church. We have one man I think of, who, whenever an announcement is made that something needs to be done, is always there on the spot. It doesn't make any difference whether anybody else shows up or not -- he is there and he gets something done. And, may I say, that is one of the most effective and powerful testimonies for Christ in this church. The person concerned may not be able to preach a sermon (I am sure that he would feel that he couldn't), but his life is a continual testimony to the reality of Christ living in him. He is one of the most effective ministers for Christ in this whole church.

That is the gift of service, and what a wonderful gift it is.

The Gift of Teaching:

Then there is the gift of teaching mentioned here. This is the capacity to impart truth, or to instruct, by analysis and application.

By the way, it is not determined by your age group. You don't have a gift for teaching young people rather than a gift for teaching middle-aged folks. Incidentally, I have never run into anybody who thought they had a gift for teaching old people, yet, if this were an age matter, you would expect to find that.

It is simply the gift of teaching, wherever it is employed. It is the God-given capacity to instruct, and, thus, a very valuable gift.

It has nothing to do with the office you hold; you may be a teacher in the Sunday School and not have the gift of teaching; it is too bad if you are. We hope that those who teach have the gift of teaching, but just the fact that you are given the job of teaching doesn't mean that you have the gift. It is up to those who can determine it to find out who has the gift of teaching.

The Gift of Exhortation:

Then there is the gift of exhortation. Frequently this is given right with the gift of teaching, but it is a different gift entirely. The gift of exhortation is the capacity to move the will, to warm the heart, to impel to action.

You have met people with this gift. We have some here, and we thank God for them.

Blaming Someone for Not Exercising a Gift:

But let me say something about these two gifts of teaching and exhortation especially. It is such a silly thing to blame someone for not exercising a gift that he doesn't possess.

Frequently we have someone speak who has the gift of teaching, He instructs us, our minds are illuminated, and we understand things so much better than we did before. All the intellectuals go away from the meeting saying, "My, what a wonderful speaker. That was wonderful. What I learned under that man!" But all the emotionally-oriented people go away saying, "Oh, that was terrible. So dry!" This is blaming the man for not exercising the gift of exhortation which he doesn't possess.

On the other hand, when an exhorter comes along who has the gift of exhortation but not of teaching, all the intellectuals go away saying, "That was terrible -- nothing to edify me at all!" And the emotional people say, "That was wonderful. I could have listened to that man all day!"

Well, let me say that *this is wrong!*

If a teacher teaches, thank God for the gift, and go and warm your own heart. And if an exhorter comes, thank God for the gift of exhortation, and go and get a book and teach yourself. You see, these gifts are given to bless and edify the whole body.

The Gift of Contributing:

There is, also, the gift of contributing, or of giving, that is mentioned here.

All Christians are expected to contribute -- this is a sign that you have received: "Freely you have received," Jesus says, "freely give," {cf, Matt 10:8 KJV}. All Christians, without exception, if they really know the Lord, will give.

But there are some who have a special gift of giving, and, by the way, it is not always the rich people either. Sometimes the very poorest people have the gift of giving, and, even out of their poverty, they find ways to give. They give cheerfully and gladly to bless the heart. Thank God for these!

I think with this gift there is often given the gift of making money. If God has given you the gift of making money, remember that it is a definite gift and that it is not given in order that you might have a much higher standard of living than anybody else. It isn't given to you in order that you might enjoy luxuries that others don't have, but, rather, that you might employ it in advancing the cause of Christ and ministering to the body of Christ -- that is why it is given. It is the capacity to receive the power of the Holy Spirit to give in such a way as to bless and advance the work of God. It is as much a necessary part of the ministry of the whole body as the ministry of teaching or preaching. Thank God if you have that gift. We couldn't exist, the body could not work without those who have the gift of giving.

Incidentally, I believe that there is nothing in Scripture that sustains the idea that you should leave your giving until after you are dead. Second Corinthians 5:10 says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done *in the body* ." So, as the jingle puts it,

Do your givin'
While you're livin'
Then you're knowin'
Where it's goin.'

And that is a good idea!

The Gift of Ruling:

Next, Paul mentions the gift of giving aid, or, really, the gift of ruling or administering. Oh, what a blessed gift that is!

This is what is called the gift of administration in First Corinthians 12. It is the capacity to plan or execute and organize, and it is of tremendous value -- not only in the actual organizing of the church, but in planning

conferences and meetings, and in setting up special projects, missionary enterprises, and so on. If God has given you this gift, by all means get to work with it!

The Gift of Mercy:

Then there is the gift of showing mercy. This is the gift of what we might call consolation or encouragement -- the ability, as Isaiah so beautifully puts it, "to speak a word in season to him who is weary," {cf, Isa 50:4 KJV}. The ability to encourage, to bless in time of special need, to come into a home where things are upset and difficult, and say just the right thing.

Every Christian has Several Gifts:

Now, these gifts are not limited to those in the professional ministry, to just the so-called "clergy." It would be horrible if they were. The whole ministry is the work of the whole body -- that is what the Scripture teaches. All of us together have gifts of the Spirit which we must exercise -- and the whole body falters and fails if you aren't doing your part in exercising the gifts that God has given you.

This is only a partial list here, but I believe that every Christian has several of these gifts. Now, you find out which gifts you have, will you?

You find them out and use them, because, if you are not using the gift that God has given you, you are robbing Christ of his right to be in you what he wants to be. You are robbing him of his inheritance in the saints {cf, Eph 1:18}, and hindering him from the work which he longs to see accomplished.

The point that the Apostle Paul is making here is not so much to give us a list of what the gifts are, but that, no matter which gifts we have, we need to put them to work for God. What he is saying is:

- Get with it!
- Wholeheartedly enter into this.
- Unreservedly give yourself to the ministry of the gifts you possess.
- Make this your calling.
- Make this your reason for existence -- that you might find occasion to exercise your gifts.

Then, you see, the work of Christ will prosper.

CONCLUSION:

Observe how he goes through this. Let's go through it again:

- "If you have the gift of prophecy," he says, "then preach in proportion to your faith." Or, as Phillips puts it, "Unto the limit of your vision." Don't hold back! Present everything that God gives you to see in the Scriptures.
- If you have the gift of service, then give yourself to serving. Don't wait till somebody comes around and asks you to do things. Get busy and find opportunities. Give yourself wholeheartedly to the exercise of this gift.
- If you have the gift of teaching, then you ought to be teaching. You have no business sitting in the pew continually, without a ministry of your own, if you possess the gift of teaching. Find an avenue of teaching, in the home, in the Sunday School, in the church -- somewhere. Call some folks together (you'll find someone who has the gift of listening) and then start there.
- If you have the gift of exhortation, then be exhorting, Paul says. Get with it, in other words. Get involved. Start using the gifts that God has given to you.

- If you have the gift of giving, then keep on giving out liberally. Don't just give until you have reached your quota for the deduction on the income tax, but keep pouring it out and give liberally.
- If you have the gift of ruling, do it with zeal. Do it with concentration and with eagerness.
- If you have the gift of mercy, do it with cheerfulness. Oh, that is a blessed word, isn't it? None of us want any of these Job's-comforters to come around when we are down and defeated, just to pour more gloom on the occasion. No, if you have the ministry of speaking the word of help, do it "with cheerfulness," Paul says.

The mark of whether it comes from the Spirit or of the flesh is that it be done in the wholehearted, unrelenting participation of the Spirit. That is, *it never ceases*.

Why is this the mark? Because these gifts can be exercised in the flesh, and they can be a fair imitation of the real thing -- for a while. But there is one thing about the imitation: If it isn't patted on the back and ministered to, or given full credit, or public recognition, *it stops!*

The mark of the ministry that is in the flesh is that it just flashes up for a while, and, as long as it has the public center of attention, it goes ahead. But as soon as that fades, it quits.

On the other hand, the mark of the ministry of the Spirit is that, regardless of whether anyone says anything or sees anything, it keeps right on going! That is because it is unto the Lord. You can't continue with the perennial enthusiasm that you show without having discovered the secret of resting on the indwelling life of Jesus Christ. That is why this wholehearted, continual service is the mark of a Spirit-filled ministry.

- It is the mark that you have discovered the fountain of living waters, and, therefore, out of your own inner being there flows rivers of living water and blessing to others.
- It is the mark that you have the secret of a life-time of fruitful service -- twelve months out of the year the fruit of the Spirit is evident in your life because you have learned how to really live in the fellowship of an ungrieved Spirit, in the smile of the Lord Jesus, and delighting the heart of the Father.

That is the secret of real, wholehearted participation in these ministries.

A friend was telling me about seeing a truck driving down the highway the other day. It was a moving van, and on the back of it was a sign. As this man pulled up behind the truck, he read:

ANY LOAD -- ANY TIME -- ANYWHERE

And he thought to himself, "That is exactly what the Christian life ought to be -- any load, Lord Jesus, any time, anywhere!"

That is the key to the ministry of the gifts of the Spirit in the body of Christ.

I am just praying that many will heed the Word of God we have just considered and that your heart will be saying right now, as mine is:

"Lord Jesus, any load, any time anywhere -- I am available!"

Prayer:

Our Father, how we need these practical admonitions. How much they touch our lives right were we live. Lord, how often we have short-changed you -- we who are designed to be your instruments of expression, whose very bodies are intended to be the means by which you manifest your life on earth! Lord, how many times we have withheld them and refused to

respond! Forgive us this and, by your grace, Lord, may we recognize that the whole purpose of our existence and the whole glory and thrill of life are to be an instrument of yours. We cannot do this, Lord, in the flesh, but, by that power of your indwelling life, we pray that we may sense this, and present ourselves anew to you in this moment. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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