

WHO AM I, LORD?

by Ray C. Stedman

Last week we saw that the only logical and sensible thing that a Christian can do with his body is to turn it over to the Lord, present it to him, and ask him to use it in everything he does. We have quoted these words from Scripture many times: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus," {Col 3:17b RSV}. That means by his strength and by his power. That is what Paul is exhorting us to in Romans 12:1-2. "Present your bodies a living sacrifice" {Rom 12:1b RSV}, not just to come to church in, but to do everything in terms of that power and strength which God supplies to you.

There are two things that are necessary to make that happen:

1. One is to "stop being conformed to the world," {cf, Rom 12:2a}. Stop acting like everyone else around you. As we saw last week, that does not mean making up a list of ten no-no's to quit doing. This is not a negative thing so much as it is a positive one. It is not that you stop doing a few things that other people are doing that are regarded as "wrong," it is more that you start doing some things that they don't do at all -- like loving your enemy, and forgiving when you have been injured, and returning good for evil, and showing kindness to those who are ungrateful and selfish. These are the things we are called to do. This is not being conformed to the world.
2. The only way you can do this is to take the second step, to "be transformed by having your mind renewed," {cf, Rom 12:2b}.

From Verse 3 through the rest of Chapter 12, the Apostle Paul is talking about what it means specifically to have your thinking changed.

The place to start is with yourself. That is always where God starts. He never wants to change others until he has changed you. Jesus said, "First remove the beam that is in your own eye, then you will see clearly how to help your brother remove the little sliver that is in his eye," {cf, Matt 7:3-5, Luke 6:41-42}. The order of this is so important! Start with yourself first.

In Verses 3-8, there are two things the apostle tells us about our thinking of ourselves: First, what to think about who we are; and then what to think about the gifts God has given us.

Let's begin with the word about our view of ourselves, Verse 3:

For by the grace given to me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. {Rom 12:3 NIV}

Paul is saying, first, to think about yourself.

Many people get the idea that the Christian life consists of never thinking about yourself. Because we know that ultimately we are to reach out to others, we think that there is never any place for thinking about ourselves. That is wrong. It is true that some Christians have abused this to such a degree that all they think about is themselves. I know Christians like this who are forever going around taking their spiritual temperature, feeling their spiritual pulse, and worrying about their spiritual condition.

The Scriptures tell you to examine yourself to see whether you are in the faith or not, "to see whether Christ be in you," as Paul writes to the Corinthians {cf, 2 Cor 13:5}. It is wrong to think continually of nothing but yourself, but it is quite right to take time, occasionally, to evaluate yourself and where you are in your Christian life and experience. The apostle says so. In fact, he exhorts us with his apostolic authority to do so. "For by the grace given to me," i.e., the gift of apostleship, on the basis of that office he exhorts every one of

us to take time to think through where we are and what is going on in our lives. Every one of you is to think about yourself.

Now, Paul stresses that you have to do this in a way that avoids overrating yourself. "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought." I am sure he puts this first because this is such a natural tendency with us. But feelings can change and fluctuate a thousand times a minute. They are dependent upon so many factors over which we have no control, such as whether our glands are working properly, or whether the sun is shining, or whether we ate too much at a previous meal, or whether we got enough sleep the night before -- all these factors affect our feelings. Therefore the most foolish thing in the world is to judge yourself on the basis of how you feel at any given moment.

Now, feelings are important, and I don't mean to rule them out entirely. Sometimes people get the idea that feelings are all wrong. No, feelings aren't wrong; they are just not what you base your evaluation of yourself on. This is what the Scriptures tell us in many places.

Well then, on what basis should you evaluate yourself? The answer, of course, is how God sees you. That is reality -- what God says you are. That is the realistic way to think about yourself. It is a two-fold evaluation, as the apostle makes clear in this verse:

1. First of all, he says, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment." So, first, think soberly about yourself. What does that mean? What will sober you? Well, surely that refers to the teaching of the Scriptures on the Fall. We are all fallen creatures. We all have within us this Adamic nature which is not to be trusted at all. And as long as we are in the flesh, in the body, we are going to have this nature. Therefore, the first thing to remember about yourself is that there is something you have to watch. There will be something within you that you can't quite trust. There will be thoughts and attitudes and temptations in your life which are distorted and wrong. And they will always be there. Therefore, first of all, think soberly about yourself.
2. But then, second, think with "the measure of faith that God has given you." That is, look back over all God has told you about what has happened since you have come to Christ. The degree to which you accept what God has said about you will give you confidence and courage and ability to function as a human being any day, or at any given task. You have that courage and ability according to how much you believe what God has said.

And what has God said about you? Look back over all the tremendous truth given in the first eight chapters of Romans: We are no long in Adam, in our spirit, but are now tied to Christ. He lives with us, his power is available to us. The Holy Spirit has come to enable us to say, "No," to all the evil forces and temptations that we come up against, so that sin shall not have dominion over us, for we are not under the Law but under grace. That is the way to think about yourself. Remember that you are always going to have to be on guard because of the evil of the flesh within you, but you can always win because of the grace of God and the righteousness of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit which you have.

When I get up in the morning I try to remind myself of three things:

- First, I am made in the image of God. I am not an animal and I don't have to behave like an animal, because I have an ability within me, given by God himself, to react and relate to God. Therefore I can behave as a man and not as a beast.
- Second, I am filled with the Spirit of God. The most amazing thing has happened! Though I didn't deserve it in the least degree, I have the power of God at work within me. I have become, in some sense, the bearer of God, and God himself is willing to be at work in me in terms of the little problems and the little pressures that I am going to go through this day.
- And third, I remind myself that I am part of the plan of God, that God is working out all things to a great and final purpose in the earth and I am part of it. What I do today has purpose and significance and meaning. It is not just a meaningless thing that I am going to go through. Even the smallest

incident, the most apparently insignificant word or relationship, is involved in that great plan. Therefore it has meaning and purpose.

I don't know what that does for you, but it gives me confidence without conceit. You see, I have a sense of being able to cope, of being able to handle life. And yet I know that I don't deserve this gift of worth and grace, and yet I have it. Therefore I can't be conceited about it, but I can be confident in it. I don't know anything else that can set you on your feet like that. If you succumb to the thinking of the world around you, you will end up either as bigheaded and as boastful and as loudmouthed as Mohammed Ali, or you will end up certain that you can't do anything and as unwilling to attempt anything, as meek and fearful and timid as a mouse. But God has provided a way that we can face life daily with confidence, and yet without a vestige of conceit, because we know that it doesn't come from us.

Now Paul moves to our life in the church and he takes up the subject of the gifts that God has given. Not only are you who you are because of the work of Christ, but you have what you have because of his work too. Here the apostle says, in Verse 4,

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. {Rom 12:4-5 NIV}

That is a beautiful picture of the church. I don't know what you think about the church. Most of us have grown up with various backgrounds and experiences in churches, and I am sure all of us have a mental picture of what the church ought to be. But here is where we need our thinking changed. We need to be renewed in our mind. God has told us that his church is like a human body. If you want a good course in ecclesiology, just stand in front of your mirror some morning without your clothes on and examine your body. That is what the church is like.

The first thing that will impress you is that there is only one body there, not two. There is only one church in all the world. All Christians belong to it, and it doesn't make any difference whether they have a denominational label or not. If they have been born of the Spirit of God, they are members of that church, and there is only one church. Therefore, wherever the members meet one another, they already belong to each other. Whether you have your name on a church roll somewhere is of no significance whatsoever. There is only one church, one body, yet there are many members.

The second thing that will strike you as you look at your own body is that it has members. It isn't just a trunk, but it has arms and legs and feet and toes and fingers and eyes and ears and a number of other interesting protuberances. And they are all for a purpose. They are part of a body, they belong to the body. And so the church of Christ has many members, and they are different. That is what I like about the church -- the diversity of it. And yet that is so contrary to the spirit of the age. In this age in which we live, the spirit of the world around us is one of uniformity. Everybody is pressured to look and act and talk and think alike. You join a club and you have to dress like they dress, drive the same general class of car, etc. You join another club and you have to change your way of speaking. This is the Christian life. I don't know why it is that we have this mentality that we have to Xerox everything. Even in the church, people want to turn out Christians like so many sausages -- all alike. No matter where you cut them they are still bologna.

But that is not God's idea of the church. His idea is to have diversity within the church. There are many members, and they are not to be alike. That is the joy of it. They don't come from the same class or the same race or the same color, and they don't even have the same gifts. They have many gifts. A true church is one where people are beginning to recognize that diversity more and more and rejoice in it. They let people be different and don't try to grind them all out alike.

I have been with Christian groups in which you could discern who the members were by the fact that they all carried the same Bible under their arms -- the same version and even the same color. Sometimes they even would have identical notebooks.

That isn't the way God runs his church. Each member is to be different, with a blessed diversity. And yet,

Paul says, though these members do not all have the same function, each one belongs to all the others. That is unique. No other organization in the world can say that about itself. In all other organizations the members are individually there for what each can get out of it. But in the church of Jesus Christ, we belong to one another. We share with one another. Paul says we are to have the same care, one for another. Isn't this remarkable! How terrible it would be if all Christians were exactly the same.

Years ago, Ron Ritchie was our high school pastor and was teaching First Corinthians 12 to some of the kids. To illustrate his point, he painted a football like one huge eye, a human eye, with a big, round pupil. He wrapped it in a blanket and put it under his arm and showed it to the kids. "What do you think of my baby?" he asked. They would look at it and say, "Oh, gross!" Here was this eye staring out at them. He asked them, "What if your girlfriend was just an eye? If you took her out on a date there would be this great big eye sitting across from you in the booth. What a date that would be!" He drove home this point very forcibly: We are not just one member; we are many. We are to have the same care one for another. Even though we are different, we are to love each other because we belong to each other. We share the same life together.

That is why you are to get along with other Christians -- not because you like them, necessarily, or that they are very nice, but just because you belong to each other. They are your brothers and sisters. And when they hurt, you will hurt, whether you know it or not. And when they are honored, you will be honored, whether you know it or not.

A number of years ago I fell and injured my wrist rather severely. It swelled up and got very painful. And the rest of my body felt so bad about it that it sat up all night to keep it company. That is what the body of Christ is to do when one member is hurt. We are tied to one another, and when one hurts, all hurt.

Not only is that true, but Paul goes on to point out that we have gifts that determine our function within the body; Verse 6:

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. {Rom 12:6-8 NIV}

That is only a partial list of gifts. There are many others that are mentioned in First Corinthians 12 and First Peter 4 and Ephesians 4. You have to put them all together to get the total list of gifts that are available to us. But the point the apostle makes is this: God has given gifts. Paul calls them "graces," and we have different gifts, according to the specific gift of grace that is given to us. I like that term for gifts because it indicates something about them. Graces are graceful. Something graceful is a delight to watch in action. This is true about a spiritual gift. It is an ability God has given you because he wants you function along this line. It enables you to do this thing so naturally and smoothly and beautifully that others will take note of it, and ask you to do it, and enjoy watching you do it. And you will enjoy it, too.

A spiritual gift is a fulfilling thing when you are using it. You enjoy doing it, and that is why it is called a "grace" that is given to you. It is not a hard, painful thing to do; it is something you delight in doing. And you can improve in it as you do it. Therefore it is one of the things that will make life interesting and fulfilling for you. Imagine how hurt your parents would be if you gave gifts to your children, wrapped them all up in beautiful packages and put them under the Christmas tree, and then handed them out to your children and the child just took it and laid it aside. What if he said, "Thank you," and never bothered to open it, never made any effort to find out what was in it.

Can you imagine how the Lord must feel when he has given gifts to us that he intends us to use and we never take the trouble to find out what they are, and never put them to work, and excuse ourselves by saying that we can't do anything. But the Word of God tells us there is not a single Christian who is left out in this matter of the distribution of gifts. It is clear from this account that the gifts Paul lists here are intended to be used. That is what Paul stresses here.

The first gift mentioned is **prophesying**. In First Corinthians 12 and 14 Paul tells us this is one of the best gifts of all. This is the gift you ought to covet earnestly to be manifest in your midst, because basically it is the gift of expounding Scripture, making Scripture come alive. It comes from a root word in Greek that means "to cause to shine," and it refers to the ability to take the Word of God and make it shine. Everybody sees what to do, and where to go, and how to act, and function. Peter says, "We have a more sure word of prophecy that shines as a light in a dark place," {cf, 2 Pet 1:19 KJV}. John Calvin describes prophecy as "the peculiar gift of explaining revelation." Paul says if you have the gift -- and it is not just for people who go to seminary; there may be many in a congregation who will have the gift of prophesying -- then use it. But use it according to the proportion of your faith. That is, stay with what you know. Don't try to get into areas that you don't yet understand. That will come later as you grow in the use of your gift. Start where you do understand Scripture, make it clear to people, explain it. That is the gift of prophesying.

There are some who have the gift of **servicing**. This is a very beautiful and common gift. Many people have it. I think it is the same gift which is called "the gift of helps" in First Corinthians 12 {1 Cor 12:28 KJV}. It is the word from which we get our word deacon. It is to deaconize, i.e., to serve as an usher, to do banking on behalf of the church, or caring for widows, serving on committees -- whatever. But it is the ability to so help people with such a cheerful spirit that they are blessed by it. You know people like that. You are thinking of some right now who have the gift of helps. You just love to have them around because they are so eager to serve and they do it so willingly and cheerfully that everybody is helped and blessed by it. What a tremendous gift that is! The church runs by those who have this gift. Many of you have it, so put it to work. "If [a person's gift] is serving, let him serve."

"If [his gift] is **teaching**, let him teach." Teaching is the ability to impart knowledge and information, to instruct the mind. You see, prophesying goes much deeper. It instructs the heart and moves the will. But teaching instructs the mind, and is the basis for much else that comes in the Scriptures, in terms of gifts. Therefore the gift of teaching is a great gift, and widely established in the body. I suspect that at least 30 per cent or more of any Christian group would have the gift of teaching. If you have it, don't wait for somebody to ask you to teach. The church didn't give you these gifts. The pastor didn't give you these gifts. God gave them to you -- you put them to work. Don't wait for somebody to come around and invite you to exercise your gift. That may happen, and be glad if it does, but you still have the responsibility to use the gift God has given you, whether anybody asks you to or not. You find the occasion. Find somebody who doesn't know as much as you know and teach them, if you have the gift of teaching.

Then there is the gift of **encouragement**. That was the gift that Barnabas had. He was called "the son of encouragement," which is what Barnabas means. His name was Joseph, but no one called him Joe; they called him Barney. In the stories of Barnabas in the Scriptures he is always found with his arm around somebody's shoulder, encouraging him, comforting him, urging him on. This is a marvelous gift in the church. If you have the gift of encouragement, start anywhere and use it. God gave it to you, therefore use that gift.

Then there is the gift of giving, **contributing**. Did you know that is a gift? That means God will give you something to give, and then he will give you a desire to give it. If you have that gift, use it! The more you use it, the more you will have to give. It is part of the way you function in the body of Christ, and many can use that gift. Paul says, "Let him give generously." That is not quite an accurate translation. What Paul is really saying is, "Let him give with simplicity." It means without ostentation, without calling people's attention to it.

I heard of a man who stood up in a meeting and said, "I want to give \$100 anonymously." You can't give that way if you have the gift of giving; you give with simplicity, without making a big deal out of it.

Just give the gift as unto God and delight in the opportunity to be used by the hand of God.

Then the gift of **leadership** is mentioned. That specifically is a word that means "leading meetings." It comes from a root which means "to stand up before others." If you have that gift, there are all kinds of meetings waiting to be led. But when you use it, Paul says, do it with diligence. That is, don't wing it. Do it thoughtfully, think it through in advance. Make yourself ready for it, and use the meeting to its fullest purpose. The gift of leadership is a great gift.

Then, finally, Paul mentions the gift of *showing mercy*. I just delight in some of the people of this church who have the gift of showing mercy. I watch them in the congregation at times.

- There is a young girl who comes and brings retarded children, sits with them in her lap, and interprets the service to them.
- There is another young girl who brings a dear old lady who is partially crippled and nearly blind. She brings her almost every Sunday and ministers to her.

Mercy, you see, is helping those who are undeserving or neglected by others. The gift of showing mercy is a marvelous gift within the church, and many have it. If you have it, don't wait for somebody to show you what to do -- start doing it.

Sometimes great and marvelous organizations have grown up out of a single person beginning to exercise his gift. This ministry for retarded children, called Green Pastures, has grown up out the exercise of the gift of mercy by a single individual. There is another ministry that is just starting to take off that is reaching out to the vast crowd of homosexuals in this area. It was organized by someone who had a vision, a gift of showing mercy. They had an understanding of the homosexual's need and a desire to help. These people are starting out alone, but others will join them -- so organizations come into being by individuals exercising their gift. That is the way the church functions.

There are many other gifts that are not mentioned here, as I said, but no matter where you find a list of gifts, there are always two divisions. Peter gives this division to us in First Peter 4. He says,

Each one should use whatever spiritual gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. {1 Pet 4:10-12a NIV}

Now there are two divisions, speaking and serving. In Romans 12 the first four gifts listed have to do with speaking; there are three have to do with serving. There are two basic functions, then, of every believer in the body of Christ. Either you speak, or you serve -- one or the other. And everybody is to be involved.

Dr. F. B. Meyer, in the last generation, said this about the local church:

It is urgently needful that the Christian people of our charge should come to understand that they are not a company of invalids, to be wheeled about, or fed by hand, cosseted, nursed, and comforted, the minister being the Head Physician and Nurse; but a garrison in an enemy's country, every soul of which should have some post of duty, at which he should be prepared to make any sacrifice rather than quitting.

Now that, I think, is a biblical picture of the church, a church functioning as God intended it to function.

Now we close with this question: Who are you, anyway?

Every morning you ought to ask yourself that. Who am I? And your answer should come from the Scriptures. I am a son of God among the sons of men. I am equipped with the power of God to labor today. At the very work that is give to me today God will be with me, doing it through me. I am gifted with special abilities to help people in various areas, and I don't have to wait until Sunday to start to utilize these gifts. I can do it at my work, I can do it anywhere. I can exercise the gift that God has given me to do. As soon as I begin to find out what it is, by taking note of my desires and by asking others what they see in me and by trying out various things. I am going to set myself to the lifelong task of keeping that gift busy.

That is why Paul had to write to Timothy to say, "Stir up the gift that is in you, that which was given you by the Holy Spirit," {cf, 2 Tim 1:6}. Timothy was letting it slide. But we are expected to stir it up.

At our last elder's meeting, all the elders of the church sat down and started writing all the names of people in

this congregation who, to our knowledge, had no ministry and perhaps no awareness of their spiritual gift. You know, within a space of five minutes or less, we had a hundred or more names of men and women here. We will devote ourselves over the next year to contacting these people and helping them to discover their gifts and employ them as God intends them to. They can choose the place where they employ their gifts. It can be here, at work, at home, wherever they like.

We just want to help you find your gift. I hope you present your bodies afresh today, so you can find that gift and put it to work and be busy doing what God has sent you here to do.

Perhaps you want to renew again your request to God to lead you in the search of your spiritual gift and to lead you to put it to work, with a view toward the day when you stand before him and he says to you, "What did you do with the gift that I gave you?"

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that you will indeed enable us to understand these great themes and discover the excitement and the joy and fulfillment that come to our lives when we begin to move according to the program that you have for us, and not our own self-centered desires. Lord, help us to discover who we are before you, and then to fulfill that, that we may bless your own heart, and fulfill our own lives. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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