

The Way Forward

(From *the Epistle*: Romans xii. 6 ff.)

6 Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; **7** Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; **8** Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness. **9** Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. **10** Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; **11** Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; **12** Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; **13** Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality. **14** Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. **15** Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. **16** Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate.

Today's Epistle is the sequel to last week's Epistle: it merely continues on with this important chapter in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. As I noted last week, Romans is a repository not only of Christian doctrine but of very practical instruction for the Church, and the everyday life of the believer. It is this practical focus that will again occupy our attention today.

I have often marveled at this passage, because it speaks of church life in which, if one were to picture it as a row of light bulbs, every single one is functioning brightly and effectively within its appointed socket. There is a sense of joyous efficiency here, of a supernaturally inspired and empowered togetherness, each individual united toward the same end. No one, as we shall soon see, is left out, neither the ordained offices, nor the laity. There is no place for duds, for those self-appointed to inactivity and apathy, for those who feel they have no talents and therefore don't participate. This is a bustling, wholehearted, even zealous scene we are looking at here. This, in fact, is the Church of Christ.

So why do we so rarely see such a divine template in operation today? There are many reasons. The modern church format often puts all of these functions either in the hands of one man, the minister, or in just a few more, those who are invariably willing to take on responsibility. The rest expect to be entertained. Or there simply has been no adequate teaching of the sort that encourages individual believers to wake up to the Spirit-powered enablement they --each and all-- have been promised by God (see not only today's text, but also 1 Corinthians chapters 12 and 14, and Ephesians 4:1-16). Lastly, compared to the early church, it may well be that our weekly gatherings are fewer, and so the opportunities for these spiritual gifts to function are limited. Nevertheless, this is the calling that any church longing to be fully functional must aspire to.

Note that the degree of service of the individual members is to be absolutely unstinting. We are to operate *according to the grace that is given to us*, and to give it our best. There is nothing said here about members who have received no grace to do anything at all. Implied is that if you are a baptized believer you have already been supplied with *grace* --the gift of power from

God-- to fulfill your God-given role within the Body of Christ, the Church. But it is our part to not hold back. St. Paul's list of church functions here seems to cut clean across the usual distinction made between clergy and laity. The one *prophesying*, the preacher, is to employ all the faith he possesses in doing so. *Ministry* here can also be translated *servicing*, a task belonging to all Christians, who are to do so *according to the proportion of faith* they've received, in other words, without reservation. The office of *teaching* can belong to both laity and clergy, although the role of exhortation, or encouragement, would again be more the province of the clergy. *Giving* is a place of service absolutely within the realm of every believer, and it is to be done *with simplicity* ["sincerity, mental honesty, openness of heart manifesting itself by liberality", *Thayer*]. *Ruling*, rightly the duty of leaders, is to be done *diligently* [earnestly], but *showing mercy* is again a universal call to all within the Church: to care for the ill, the poor, the helpless. It is to be done *with cheerfulness* [in the Greek, "with hilarity"], i.e., ungrudgingly, with "readiness of mind".

Following this list of duties specific to the Church are attitudes incumbent upon Christians in all areas of life, whether within the Church, or at home, or in their communities. It describes a way of life, and there is enough here to keep you and me busy for many lifetimes, let alone one. *Love without dissimulation* (Greek: "not hypocritical"): without ulterior motive; without acting one way toward others, on the outside, but thinking another way, inside. *Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good*. Having a horror of evil, and literally gluing oneself to the good are in extremely short supply today. We are inured, deadened, to evil, primarily because of the media, and the definition of *that which is good* has been grossly altered, especially to exclude and malign the virtues, such as love, holiness, purity, sanctity, loyalty, faithfulness, selflessness. The Old Testament Book of Proverbs is among our best sources for the differentiation of good and evil.

Will I actually *give honor* to you above myself? Will I discipline myself to treat you like royalty, even if I know you to be beneath me, say, in intelligence, or social background, or income, or good looks, or accomplishment? Will I conduct my affairs zealously, not sluggishly? *Continuing instant in prayer* means steadfastly, not giving up for anything, even tribulation, for my *hope* is based upon my faith in God. Charity (*distributing to the needs of the saints*) is again invoked regarding my Christian brothers, which means that I should keep my eyes and ears open to their needs. And *hospitality* should be a Northern grace as well as a "Southern" one!

Blessing those which *persecute* is surely among the highest of spiritual attainments, especially for us, here and now. But I find myself thinking, "As an American, after all, I have my rights, right? I should scorn and hate those elements in society that are undermining our way of life and ruining the country and marginalizing God and His people, right? Why, I can't think one good thought about them!" No...: *Bless them which persecute you: bless , and curse not.*

Rejoice with them that do rejoice , and weep with them that weep. “Now, how am I going to do that?” I cry. “My heart is so hard and cold. If they rejoice, I’ll envy them, because of my own self-pity and dissatisfaction with my circumstances. And if they weep, I’ll have no patience with them. I just don’t know how to properly relate to people going through hard, tough times.” And at the very end of this passage, just for good measure: *Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate.* The New International Version (NIV) puts it this way: *Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.* Here is another extraordinary burden that the Apostle is laying upon the shoulders of the believer. I find myself naturally conceited, and inclined to think of myself as better than others. And I am not to associate with the rich, famous, attractive, comely, successful, but with the lowly: the unknown, the unimportant, the fearful and ignorant, the powerless, the failures. Yes, with *them!*

Now all of the above, friends, is not presented to us as optional by God’s Word. It is a holy expectation of anyone taking the name of “Christian”, and attaching himself to the church of Christ. It should be clear that no excuse-making is acceptable: not “I have no time.” Nor, “I have no talent nor ability to do these things”. If we are here --here in *this place* for the purpose for which it was set apart-- then these matters are our duty. The enablement is *the grace that is given to us*, as we noted before. If I exercise my faith, on the basis of what God has promised, to believe that He has in fact thus gifted me, then I can perform that which otherwise seems impossible to me: I will learn how to begin to fulfill the twenty-four --yes, *twenty-four*-- graces which St. Paul enumerates in this portion of Scripture.

If we take today’s Epistle together with last week’s, we will begin to assemble a picture of the whole mission that is ours in these times. A week ago we examined the initial verses of Romans 12, and considered the meaning of these words:

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God (vs. 2).

But if one is to turn away from one thing, *this world*, there must be something to replace it with. And that something is life in God’s Kingdom on earth, His Church. We have gotten a little taste of it today. Putting it into practice is another thing. This is not given to us as an easy task. No, it is, in fact, extremely difficult, because it calls for all we have, and everything we are. But the reward is far, far in excess of the effort. For those willing to join in, that fact will become more and more apparent with each passing day.

For the reward is the blessing, and approval, of God.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.