

Spiritual Workout

Romans 12:3-8

Key verse 6a, “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them...”

Let me start with a question: Do you want your body to be strong and healthy? If so, how many of you exercise regularly? Recently, my wife and I signed up for the UIC gym with two purposes: to stay healthy and to evangelize students. I met Michael there. I said to him, “Michael, you work out here every day! But how do you exercise your spirit?” Now, Michael joins us for Bible study every Friday—for his spiritual workout.

You might wonder, what does physical exercise have to do with spiritual gifts? Paul calls the Church the body of Christ. Each of us who has accepted Christ as Lord is a member of that body. So, what would happen if only one part of your body—say, your right foot or your lips—exercised regularly? Would your whole body be healthy? Of course not. Likewise, the church, as the body of Christ, needs to exercise *collectively*. Each of us, as individual members, needs to regularly exercise our *spiritual* gifts for the body to become strong. Through this message, may we learn from Paul how to grow strong together.

I. Self-Assessment (3)

Before beginning a workout routine, we typically start with a self-assessment. When I first approached the bench press, Michael asked me, “David, when was the last time you did this? How much do you think you can lift?”

Some of you may have taken online self-assessments to discover interests and aptitudes. Likewise, Paul encourages us to do a *spiritual* self-assessment. Paul begins with an important principle: we assess ourselves beginning with *God’s grace*. For Paul, that grace was apostleship. He had persecuted the Church, yet the risen Christ, in His mercy, called him to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:15, “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”

As we remember God’s grace, how should we see ourselves? Let’s read verse 3. “For by the grace given to me I say to 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 that God has assigned.”

Firstly, Paul tells us that we shouldn’t think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. Apostle Paul warns us of empty pride and self-conceit. All as Adam’s descendants

are full of pride, and we like to think of ourselves better than we are. We easily then become proud of our God-given spiritual gifts and use them to feel superior. I have the gift of prophecy, but you only have the gift of service! I am better than you! There is also the opposite side of pride. If someone says habitually, "I am nobody! I am not good at anything," this is false humility. We shouldn't think of ourselves in any of these two extreme ways.

Secondly, we need to have sober judgment. What makes you sober? As for me, the first truth is that I am dependent. Without air, I can't survive even for one minute. Water and food are necessities for life. I am not self-sufficient, but dependent on God and on others. Second truth, I have a sinful nature within me. Though I want to do good, evil lies at hand, right in my mind and heart (Ro 7:21). I keep doing what I don't want to do, but I can't do what I truly want to do. If I were left alone without God's help, I am nothing but a wretched man.

Thirdly, we need to think of ourselves in Christ. Look at verse 3 again. "...each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." We need to understand the measure of faith that God has assigned" from the book of Romans. Apostle Paul tells us to believe who God says we are.

- God declares that you are guiltless and righteous because you are in Christ (4:24-25).
- There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ (8:1).
- We are sons of God who can call God, Abba! Father!" (8:15)
- The Holy Spirit in us empowers us to put to death the deeds of the body and enables us to live a holy life (8:13).
- You are more than a conqueror in Christ who loved us and nothing can separate us from the love of God (8:37,39).
- In view of God's mercy, we offer our bodies as living sacrifices that is pleasing to God (12:1)

In summary, these are what God says about you: You are in Christ; You are in the Holy Spirit; You're under God's grace, not under the law. You are more than a conqueror. Nothing can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ (8:39). Therefore, you shouldn't think of yourself based on your GPA or school. Your past sins, wounds and experiences do not define you. Your performance, title, income and gifts do not define you. You are in Christ. And in view of all this, we can offer our bodies as living sacrifices that are pleasing to God, as our true worship.

II. We belong to one another (4-5)

Verses 4-5 tell us what the church is. Many Christians say they love Christ, but not their local church nor organized religion due to past hurts and experiences. What does Paul say? Look at verses 4-5. “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”

Paul uses the metaphor of the human body. It has many parts, each with a unique function, yet all interconnected and interdependent. In Paul’s day, the Roman church included Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free, rich and poor. Yet, Paul says they are *one body* in Christ. And then, even more personally: “individually members of one another.” That means we *belong to each other*.

So what does this practically mean? I think of marriage. When I married my wife, we belong to each other. What was hers became mine—and vice versa. Her family became my family. Her old Chevy Nova? Mine. Her school loans? Also mine. Her joys and sorrows became mine, too. But also, in my early marriage, I felt inferior when my wife corrected my English. But one day I asked her to edit my message. She did, and the students loved it. I realized: her strengths are mine, and my weaknesses are hers. Two are better than one.

Likewise, when we believe in Jesus, He enters into such a marriage covenant with us. All that He accomplished becomes ours—and all our sins became His on the cross. When we’re each united to Christ, then we’re also united to one another! Just we belong to Christ, and Christ to us, we belong to one another! Look around you today- you belong to one another!

Can we apply this spiritual truth that we belong to one another in our church instead of becoming competitive, feeling inferior and superior, or indifferent? Imagine a blind man and a lame man. Alone, both are limited. But if they work together—one offering his legs, the other his eyes—they can go anywhere. When we embrace our interdependence, the church becomes God’s instrument to bring strength, joy, and healing into this broken world.

III. Spiritual workout (6-8)

Let’s read verses 6-8. “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; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.” Grammatically, this is one long sentence—but what’s the main verb? USE. Or as the NASB puts it, “EXERCISE them.”

What are the spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit gives for us to serve one another? According to Pastor Kevin's overview message there are 22 spiritual gifts. Here Paul intentionally lists 7 in a certain order. Look at verses 6b-8 again.

Prophecy and service: What is prophecy? Prophecy is helping people really hear the voice of God. Why prophecy first? Prophecy is what we need most desperately in our times; we need to hear God's voice that leads to life, above all the other voices that lead to death. Those with the gift of prophecy hear God's voice, and then speak God's words, plan and purpose to others. Who can prophesy? Acts 2:17a says, "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." So when God pours out his holy spirit on us, even young and old can prophesy. However, we don't prophesy our own ideas or culture. If so, we become false prophets. But when we are connected to God, God can speak through us. So, how can we exercise the gift of prophecy? We need to take off our airpods, and make time to pay careful attention to the word of God. We need to spend time on our knees in prayer, listening to God's voice. Once you have absolute confidence that God is speaking, then proclaim it boldly even at the risk of your life, which is in proportion to your faith.

While prophecy is speaking God's message to people, service is being Christ's hands and feet in the church and for the world. Last Saturday, an 84-year old young man helped a family move. What moved me was his deep love for the family. He was like our Lord Jesus who came not to be served, but to serve. To exercise the gift of service, we need to use our hands, feet, our backs and most importantly, our hearts of love and humility. When we exercise both the gifts of prophecy and service, we become a source of blessing. How beautiful it is when the gifts of prophecy and service are used together to build up the church!

Teaching and exhorting: Teaching is to explain and instruct others in the word of God clearly. How important it is to teach and explain the gospel, the good news, that brings salvation! How important it is to teach the word of God with careful instruction so we can grow mature in our faith. So in UBF, we know the importance of growing as excellent Bible teachers. But what if a teacher only gives out lots of information? If that's the case, then AI makes a better teacher. However, exhorting is to encourage and comfort others, helping them practically in their daily lives to apply what Christ is teaching. So how can we exercise the gifts of teaching and exhortation? First, we need to be excellent students of God's word like the Berean Christians. We can diligently make Bible study materials and be ready to teach anyone, anytime. To grow in exhortation, we need to have deep compassion. We need to grow in humility to listen carefully to others; we open our hearts to share others' grief and suffering, and rejoice with others' joy. When we exercise our

mind to study and teach diligently, and exercise our exhortation to encourage others, we become good shepherds like our Lord Jesus. God then uses our church to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey everything Christ has taught us.

Contributing, leading and doing acts of mercy are the last three spiritual gifts. I group them together because an additional instruction is attached to each. Apostle Paul says, “the one who contributes, in generosity.” This spiritual gift is the gift of sharing what God has given us. Why should we give in generosity? It is because God is generous. Ro 8:32 says, “God who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” So how can we exercise giving? Let’s exercise our hands- instead of holding tightly onto something, let’s open our hands and give! Give until it hurts! Give of our time, our heart, not to mention our wallets! Next Apostle Paul says, “the one who leads, with zeal.” What is the gift of leadership? A spiritual leader doesn’t just preside over a meeting. He is a steward, a protector and guide who leads others with God’s vision and direction. Why with zeal? Who will follow a lazy or discouraged leader? So if God has given you the gift of leadership, lead others with diligence, whole hearted passion, and a life-giving spirit. Lastly, Apostle Paul says, “the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.” What are acts of mercy? It is to give even a cup of cold water to someone thirsty. It is to practice the compassion of Christ by finding and practically meeting others’ needs. Why with cheerfulness? It is because God loves a cheerful giver (2Co 9:7).

Looking at this list, are only some given the gift of prophecy, or service, or teaching, or exhorting, or contributing, or leading, or showing acts of mercy? Can any of you say, “I have none of these spiritual gifts whatsoever!” Listen to Apostle Paul in verse 6a, “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.” If we are in the Holy Spirit, the very Giver of spiritual gifts is in us. He does not dwell in us empty-handed. He has come to us with spiritual gifts necessary to build up the body of Christ.

So how do you discover your gifts? When you have the attitude and prayer, “Lord, I belong to You and to this church—how can I build it up?” God will show you. Say you walk into a bathroom and see the trash overflowing. You have three choices: ignore it, complain, or clean it up. If you choose the third, Praise God—God just used you in the gift of service.

When we first begin working out physically, we don’t know if we have a particular gift of sprinting or weight lifting or tennis. But as we try and try with a good coach, we will find unique athletic gifts. In the same way, when we exercise every opportunity to serve God, exercising prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, contribution, leading, acts of mercy—then do you know what happens? Even weak spiritual gifts will grow like muscles. The more we use them, the stronger and bigger they will become. And then God will help you to discover your unique gifts more clearly. You may discover- Wow! When I serve others

wholeheartedly, God gives me heavenly joy and others are built up! Or when I teach the Bible with much prayer, God sends the Holy Spirit to bring others to salvation! Or God has given me worldly wealth to generously support world mission!

When we offer ourselves to God to be used by him anywhere, anytime, for anybody, then God is pleased- for this is true spiritual worship (Ro 12:1). The more we use God's gifts the more we grow deeper in his grace. And the more the body of Christ becomes functional, mature, influential, and beautiful. The glory of Risen Jesus is revealed to the world!

Let's read our key verse 6a, one more time, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them..." May God bless each of us individually and the church collectively to grow strong. May God bless us to see ourselves soberly, know we belong to one another, and then use our spiritual gifts for the church and the world.