

Exercising Your Gifts in the Body

Romans 12:1-6a

This morning we are in the third week of a new sermon series called “Gifted to Serve”. The beginning of a new year provides us with an important time to assess where we are and how we are doing in various areas of our life. As we assess the many aspects of our lives we often begin to make goals and changes in how we organize, work, exercise, eat, spend our time, etc. It is a great time to begin putting new things into practice. The same is true in our lives spiritually. This provides us with a wonderful opportunity to assess where we need to grow and develop in our walk with the Lord.

The area that we are focusing on at the start of this year is in serving. Serving others is a vital part of life, but when we serve spiritually we also see that it is a mark of Christian maturity. If you know Jesus as your Lord, then you were created and called to service. **Ephesians 2:8-10** says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” The reality is that works cannot earn salvation for anyone, but when we are truly saved we will understand our calling to work and serve the Lord.

We find three primary motivations for service in God’s Word. **First, all believers have been called to serve the Lord.** **Galatians 5:13** explains, “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” **Colossians 3:23-24** affirms this by saying, “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.” **Second, all believers have been given an amazing example and instruction by Christ.** Jesus said of Himself in **Mark 10:45**, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” In other words, He didn’t come as a consumer with a “What’s in it for me?” attitude. Instead, He came to freely and willingly give of Himself as a servant for the glory of God and the good of others. We see this clearly when He humbled Himself and washed the disciples’ feet. We see this clearly in the way that He ministered to those who were neglected and abandoned. We see this clearly even as He died on the cross. **A third reason to serve is that God has given every believer at least one spiritual gift for the purpose of building up the Body of Christ.** We learned this last week from 1 Corinthians 12, where God shows us that at salvation the Holy Spirit baptizes us into the Body of Christ and equips us with a spiritual gift that is intended for the common good of the whole Body. The Holy Spirit gives these gifts as He desires, and He does so knowing exactly how we are best suited for the Body.

I wonder this morning, are you are ready to begin? Are you ready to grow in serving the Lord? Do you want to discover your spiritual gifts and begin accomplishing the purpose for which God placed you in the Body? Are you ready to exercise your gifts? Today, we are going to walk through our next steps in being gifted to serve.

Read Text

We have all heard the word “exercise” before. The word literally means “to use or apply, to engage in physical activity to sustain or improve health.” I imagine that the word just being spoken likely causes some to be anxious and causes some to be excited. We all have various feelings about exercising. Regardless of how we feel, we all know that exercise involves movement, activity, intentionality, and focus. We all can agree that consistent exercise is beneficial to our physical bodies. However, many of us are intimidated by the thought. How do I begin? What should I do first? How do I know that I am exercising correctly or effectively? How often should I exercise? There are many questions that hinder us from getting started effectively and from sustaining over the long haul. I believe the same is true when it comes to exercising our spiritual gifts in the body of Christ. Many are intimidated and unaware and, as a result, are overwhelmed, not knowing where they fit in the Body. There are many who desire to serve that wonder, “What is my first step? What am I supposed to do? Where do I belong?” Here in Romans 12, Paul explains to us three important aspects of exercising our gifts for the Lord. If we will apply them we will be amazed at how God works in and through our lives. There are three keys to exercising effectively in the Body of Christ:

I. **Surrender Your Body (vs. 1)**

This is very clear to understand. If we are going to serve the Lord well, we must commit to use our bodies for God’s glory. We don’t serve by simply thinking, dreaming, or hoping for something to occur. In serving, Jesus took a towel and washed feet and then later carried a cross and physically died. In other words, in serving He used His body to do something for others. The same is true of us still today. Paul specifically says that we are to present our bodies as a living and holy sacrifice to God. It’s important to point out here that the word “present” means “to present once and for all.” This means that it is calling for a definite and decisive commitment to the Lord. So, yes, there are daily applications to this surrender, but these daily applications all stem from the main moment of surrender. This is similar to a marriage commitment. ****ILL:** On June 21, 2003, I stood before a church and vowed to my wife that I would love, honor, and cherish her, and that I would forsake all others for her, ‘till death do us part. I devoted my life entirely to her. I presented myself once and for all to her and she did the same to me. In a similar way God is calling us to present our bodies and lives entirely to Him, once and for all. Paul here gives us several supporting statements to help us fully understand what God is calling us to do and why.

A. **The Motivation**

What should be our motivating factor? Why should we be willing to surrender our bodies to the Lord? Notice, God doesn’t force or manipulate us to surrender our bodies to Him. He simply urges, pleads, and invites. So why should we surrender our bodies to Him instead of doing whatever we want to do? The text says, “Therefore I urge you, brethren, **by the mercies of God**, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice.” In other words, we are motivated to do this on the basis of God’s mercy. Remember, Paul was writing to the church. He was writing to the “brethren”, to those who had experienced God’s mercy. The idea of mercy is that God doesn’t give us what we deserve. This is seen in the entire context of this passage.

As we read through the book of Romans we see the sobering and serious reality of all mankind. **Romans 3:10b-12** explains, “There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, there is not even one.” This leads to the summary statement in **Romans 3:23**, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” This means that all mankind, regardless of race or background, has missed God’s mark because of sin. **Romans 6:23** then explains the consequences, “For the wages of sin is death.” This means that because of our sin we are separated from God and destined to spend an eternity without Him. However, the verse continues, “But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” This is showing us that all of us deserve judgment and separation from God, but He intervened and offered a gift to us. That gift is found in **Romans 10:11-13**, “For the Scripture says, ‘Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.” God’s mercy is experienced the moment that we call upon Jesus to be our Lord. In that moment, though we are undeserving, He forgives us and cleanses us from all wrong. This brings us to the summary statement in **Romans 11:33-35**, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again?” In other words, God owes us absolutely nothing. We had absolutely nothing to bring to Him. He is the One who offered us everything when we deserved nothing. That’s why chapter 12 starts with the word “Therefore.” Since God has been so merciful and generous and gracious to us, it is only appropriate and right that we would, in response, surrender our lives, our very bodies, to Him.

For those who may think this sounds harsh, please understand that before we trusted in Christ as Savior, we used our body, knowingly or unknowingly, for sinful pleasures and purposes. We likely did this with very little thought about the harm and consequences we were causing, but now that we belong to Christ, we should want to use our body for His glory. This is exactly what Paul was referring to in **Ephesians 2**. Friend, when we consider how God has saved us from sin, from its penalty and power, and saved us from ourself, we will realize the amazing privilege it is to surrender our body to Him. Where would you be today if it weren’t for the mercies of God? God has been so good to us that it seems only fitting that we would respond by giving our lives to Him. This is the only appropriate response to give for His amazing mercy and love.

B. The Meaning

The Scripture says that we are to present our bodies as a living and holy sacrifice. What does this mean? Remember, in the Old Testament when a body was offered as a sacrifice, a literal animal was killed. In fact, all throughout the Old Testament we read of the various sacrifices that God required from His people. This was done as a sign of faith in the Lord, but also as an act of worship to Him. Today, the Old Testament sacrifices are no longer

needed, because they were all pointing to Jesus. Jesus has already come and given His life so that we might have eternal life. **Hebrews 10:10-12** says it well, “By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He (Jesus), having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God.” We have a perfect substitute in Jesus Who gave His life for our sins. However, there is still a sacrifice required from us. We no longer bring a bull or a lamb or a dove. Instead, we bring ourselves. Our lives and our bodies are to be a pleasing sacrifice to the Lord.

Notice specifically that God says we are to be a living sacrifice. This simply means that we aren't dead. God is not calling us in this context to give our lives for Him but to Him. He is calling us to live our lives today for Him, and we do this by being a holy sacrifice. The word “holy” means “sanctified, set apart.” It means that we now belong to Him. Friends, God wants us to live a holy life whether we are at home or out on business or at church. He calls us to live a life of holiness set apart for Him. **1 Peter 1:13-16** instructs us, “Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior, because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’ ” **1 Peter 2:9** continues, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

C. The Miracle

Here is the miracle. Remember, we are sinners who have fallen short of God's grace. **Isaiah 64:6** says, “For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.” In our own righteousness, the best we can bring to God is filthy rags. However, when we believe in Jesus and depend upon Him as our substitute and surrender our lives to Him as a holy sacrifice, notice how God sees us. The Bible says we are made “acceptable to God.” It means that this is pleasing and satisfying to God. He looks upon us now with favor and approval. In fact, God looks on our living by faith and surrendering our body to Him as an act of true, spiritual worship.

II. Submit your Mind (vs. 2)

To exercise in the body, we need to start by surrendering our body to the Lord. There is also a second step. If we are going to continue to exercise in the body, we must also submit our mind to the Lord. ****ILL:** It is interesting to me how we see this similarly illustrated in our physical exercise. Not too long ago I saw a report that talked about the increase of gym memberships and workout programs in January. A local owner was interviewed in the news. He was asked, “Are you worried about overcrowding?” His answer was honest. He said, “No, I know that it will weed

itself out by the end of March.” He was saying that, at the moment, people are focused on getting their bodies right, but since their mind isn’t likely to keep focused on it, it’s just a matter of time before they revert into old habits and patterns. It’s one thing when we relate this to our physical health, but it’s an entirely different thing when we relate this to our spiritual lives. What we focus our mind on ultimately affects our actions. This is why Paul instructs us in **Philippians 4:8-9**, “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell (think) on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” What we think on we will act on. So God gives us two tips to help us submit our mind to Him.

A. Resist the World

If we are going to be renewed in our mind, we must refuse to be conformed to the world. The word “conformed” describes the act of an individual assuming an outward expression that does not come from within him, nor is it representative of his inner man. It describes the outward pressure that is placed on us. In other words, the world around us puts pressure on us to try to get us to conform to its ideals, philosophies, beliefs, and ways. In the context of serving, the world will often say, “Don’t serve others. Serve yourself. Do what you want to do. Do whatever makes you happy. Do what feels good to you. Put yourself first. Be your own person. Don’t worry about others. Don’t worry about sacrificing for others. This is all about you.” Oddly enough, it sounds much like the lies that Satan told Eve, David, and countless others in Scripture. He is still telling the same lies through the world today. The world continually tries to squeeze us into its mold. The world has its fads and fashions that change with each generation. Its goal is to use pressure on all of us, not only in small matters such as how we dress, but in major matters such as moral standards, ethical standards, and religious beliefs. The world pressures us to think, act, look, believe, and ultimately behave like it does, but, Christians, we have victory over the world. As believers we have the Holy Spirit within us to empower us to overcome the ways of the world. Jesus said in **John 16:33**, “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

Because Jesus has won the victory, all believers have His power within us so that we can overcome the pressures of the world that come against us.

B. Receive the Word

We don’t have to be conformed because we can be transformed by the renewing of our mind. There is one primary tool that God has given us to transform our mind – His Word. God transforms our minds and makes us spiritually minded by using His Word. As we spend time meditating on God’s Word and making it a part of our inner being, God will begin to transform us. It means that as you continually look to Jesus, your life begins to change. The word for “transform” here is the Greek word “metamorphoomai”. From this word we get our English word “metamorphosis.” The dictionary defines it as “a change of form or a change of character.” The powerful illustration is that of a caterpillar which undergoes metamorphosis in its chrysalis and emerges as a beautiful butterfly. The same

little creature that enters that filmy tomb eventually emerges, but the change is so remarkable that it cannot even be recognized as the same old caterpillar. Why? Because it has completely changed. This is the kind of change that the Holy Spirit brings to the life of a believer who fixes His focus on Jesus and His Word. We must be transformed by the renewing of our mind. If we don't, we are likely to go back to our old habits and patterns. But this is not at all what God desires for us or from us. In fact, God wants us to know and experience His will which is good, acceptable, and perfect. But we can't experience that unless we surrender our body and submit our mind. This then leads us to the third part of exercising in the body.

III. Serve the Lord Through Spiritual Gifts (vs. 3-6a)

Notice the progression. God says surrender your body, submit your mind, and then He brings us to the final call to action in our text this morning. He calls us to take the gifts and abilities that He has given us and use them for the exaltation of Christ and edification of the body. The entire context from this point forward is dealing specifically with gifts in the body. Last week we said that spiritual gifts are spiritual abilities and skills given to every Christian by the Holy Spirit, so that believers are edified and the church is equipped to function effectively for the glory of God. It is interesting to consider the verses that lead up to this point. In **Romans 11:29** Paul explains, "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." Then in **Romans 11:36** He shows their purpose, "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen." In other words, the spiritual gifts that we have all came from God, they are to be exercised through Him and His power, and they are all for Him and His glory. The only part that we have in the matter is that we get the privilege of exercising them and using them for Him. He gave us the gifts, He gives us the ability and the opportunity to employ them, and it should all be for His honor and glory. How can we accomplish this? Verses 3-6 give us some simple but powerful instructions.

A. We Must Have the Right Attitude in Serving

The first key to spending your gifts has to do with our mindset or our attitude. Paul says specifically, "Don't think more highly of yourself than you ought to think." The Christian is to have a right attitude toward himself and toward others in the body of Christ. Listen, who are we to boast in our gifts? The gifts that you have aren't yours. They've been entrusted to you by God. Since our gifts are from God, we cannot take credit for them. All we can do is accept them and use them to honor Him. If you think that your gift is THE GIFT and everyone else's is secondary, then you're way off. This leads people to become arrogant and proud and ignores the example of humility that Christ set for us. The gift isn't for a talent show. The gift is for serving the Lord and edifying the body of Christ, so we must act in humility. The core of humility is love. If we love others like we ought, then we will have no problem acting humbly towards them. It is interesting to note that the church at Corinth had all kinds of problems with spiritual gifts. Because of the gifts of some, they had created an elite mentality where they valued certain gifts above others. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 12 to show them the diversity of gifts and explain how they all fit into the body. Then, two chapters later in 1 Corinthians 14, he gave step by step instructions about how these gifts were to be applied in their gatherings. But, nestled in between these two

chapters is a chapter that is often called “The Love Chapter.” In fact, it is quoted at nearly every wedding I have ever attended. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with quoting it at weddings, but we must not miss the immediate context. It is at the very heart of the teaching on spiritual gifts. In other words, in between God’s explanation and instruction of spiritual gifts He also tells us what kind of attitude and actions we are to display in the body. **Show 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a.** And, isn’t God’s Word always in agreement? When Peter also spoke about spiritual gifts in **1 Peter 4:8-10** he, too, started with this instruction, “Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaint. As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” We must have the right attitudes as we serve the Lord.

B. We Must Accept Our Role in the Body

Paul basically says, “Think as those who have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. Now take notice. We have many members in the body, but we don’t have the same function.” He is encouraging us to recognize that there are many different gifts and functions within the body and each part is important. It is easy for us to look at the various members of our physical body and notice differences. I look at my feet and then look at my hands. While there are some similarities in the two, it’s very easy to notice the differences. But this diversity is needed for the body to be healthy and whole. Even on a sports team, there are various positions and strengths that are represented by each player on the team. So, we must strive to have sound judgment in identifying what our gifts are and how we can use them for Him and for the edification of the Body of Christ.

We must be honest and “sound” with ourselves when seeking to discover our gifts. Remember, God gave the gifts as He desired not as we desired. I have seen on many occasions someone try to force a gift they desired that, frankly, God didn’t gift them. I once knew a pastor, for example, who felt gifted as a teacher. The problem is that nobody seemed to have the gift of listening. I don’t mean that rudely, but literally his communication was so confusing that every class he ever taught struggled and ended with just a few people in the class. To be clear he had other gifts that were beneficial to the body, but it was difficult for him to practice humility and accept his role in the body. In 1 Corinthians 12, which we saw last week, Paul even humorously described how the foot can’t complain that it’s not a hand nor can the ear complain that it is not an eye. The thought is ridiculous, but God led Paul to write this because He knew the division that was taking place. The church at Corinth had become a church where everyone wanted to be the tongue. Many were so consumed by speaking in tongues that they failed to acknowledge both the purpose of the gift and the gifts of the other people. Their actions promoted self and put down others who weren’t practicing the same, but the Bible says that we need diversity. Each part is effective when it functions to fulfill the purpose for which it was made. The same is true with each of us. We must seek to discover our gifts and then, in discovering them, instead of complaining or being dissatisfied, we must accept them and be faithful to do our part. We must accept

that God has given us many members and many different gifts and all are to be used for His glory.

C. We Must Be Appreciative of the Roles of Others

Notice next that Paul says, “We are members of one another.” This means that we need each other and thus should value and appreciate the gifts of one another. Within our physical body this is a very natural process. ****ILL:** I want you to know that I think my stomach values and appreciates the role of the various members in my body. My stomach is thankful for my nose (to smell), my brain (to tell me what I’m eating), my eyes (to show me what I want and where it is), my arm (to reach out for it), and my hand (for grabbing it and bringing to my mouth), my teeth (for chewing it up), my tongue (for tasting), my esophagus (for getting it where it needs to go), and my intestines (for making room for more). All the members work together for the benefit of the body. It is a beautiful picture. There is no rivalry or competition. There is only respect, harmony, and appreciation. The same should be true of every single believer and our role in the body of Christ. We must appreciate one another and we must strive to show that in any way that we can.

D. We Must Apply the Gifts We’ve Been Given

This little phrase is given to show what the text was clearly pointing to. The Bible is encouraging us to take the gifts that we have been given and exercise them in the Body of Christ. The ESV says it this way, “Let us use them.” In other words, God didn’t give us gifts to be wasted and sit stagnant. He gave us gifts to put to use to build up the Body of Christ.

****Closing Illustration: A Gibson ES-135.** This is a classic guitar, with a beautiful look and sound. It has great value (new around \$1,300-\$1,500). This incredible gift was donated to the first church I pastored many years ago. In fact, it was there longer than I was. Unfortunately, most people never saw it or heard it played because it was put in a case and buried in the back of a sound closet. Though the item had great value and amazing potential, it never benefited anyone because nobody was willing to use it in the body.

What are you doing in the body of Christ? Are you exercising your gifts? Have you discovered what these gifts are? Maybe for some the first question should be, have you personally received God’s main gift - the gift of salvation?

Friends, let’s make sure that we are a part of the body of Christ and, once we do, let’s discover our gifts and begin exercising them and developing them for the glory of God and the good of others.