

“LIFE IN THE SPIRIT - 2”

Romans 12:3-8

After last week’s service, in which we looked at the ways in which we are called live the life of the Holy Spirit, several people commented to me that it was very challenging stuff. Karl Barth, in his groundbreaking commentary on *Romans*, entitles the section in which he deals with the final chapters “*The Great Disturbance*”, and that is really what it is. It is a “*disturbance*” when we realise that all this doctrine, all these wonderful truths about God and his love for us, all the teaching about the grace which we have through the death of Jesus, all the promises about the Holy Spirit – it’s all supposed to make a practical, lived-out difference to our lives. This is not some kind of esoteric teaching to satisfy the intellectual cravings of a few theoretical theologians – it’s a call to live lives that are influenced in every part by God’s Spirit, lives that demonstrate transformed patterns of behaviour which arise naturally from renewed attitudes. Paul is writing about living in the power of the Holy Spirit and allowing that to be seen in all that we do.

So this chapter 12 of *Romans* – along with the following chapters – is to do with “Life in the Spirit”. It’s the ethical aspect of our discipleship. We cannot be content simply to pore over God’s word and learn the doctrine. We cannot remain satisfied with head knowledge about God. We cannot even be satisfied with heart experience of God through his Holy Spirit if it does not change every part of our lives. As God’s people we are to be a truly “charismatic community”. That is, we are all given “charisms”, gifts (as we see here in v6) and these gifts of grace from the Holy Spirit are to allow us to live out our Christian faith in the world.

Some people, I know, have difficulty with the word “charismatic”. To some extent it has been hijacked by some people within the Church as a kind of “badge” word to give the impression that they are more spiritually mature than others. Other people use it almost as a term of abuse. The word comes from the Greek word Paul uses here for gifts and it’s clear from this and other passages that Paul thinks of all the Christians in Rome as, properly speaking, charismatic. James Dunn in his commentary on *Romans* writes this:

*“Paul evidently did not conceive of a congregation [we might add, of a Church] made up of charismatics and non-charismatics: all are charismatics for that is what being a member of one body in Christ means. Since such an assertion was hardly based on firsthand knowledge of the different Roman congregations, it must mean that this is simply a description of how Paul understands and defines any congregation as Christ’s body, or as one body in Christ. Implicit here is an ecclesiology of the church as charismatic community, not overly dependent on any one or two particularly gifted individuals, but mutually interdependent each on everyone else ...”*¹

To call yourself “charismatic” is simply another way of saying that you are a Christian who has been given gifts by God through his Holy Spirit – and, as we began to see last week, that means **all** Christians. And we are to make use of the power and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in all that we do. Once we get it into our heads that God has given us the Holy Spirit to help us in our Christian lives, then we can begin to live as he really wants us to. John Robinson writes in *Wrestling with Romans* (that’s not the screenplay for *Gladiator*, by the way), “*The logic, as always in Christian ethics, is not the Kantian, ‘You ought, therefore you can’, but ‘You can, therefore you ought’.*”² In other words, this isn’t a call to try really hard in the hope that God will give you his power – as if we’re always under some kind of pressure to achieve, and once we do, God will reward you with a spiritual gift or two. But a recognition that God has given you his power – it’s there already – now it’s up to you to use it. Leon Morris, in his commentary, puts it like this: “*Each of the Roman Christians has a gift and therefore a responsibility.*”³

¹ Word Biblical Commentary Volume 38b *Romans 9-16* (Word 1988) p734

² *Wrestling With Romans* (SCM 1979) p134

³ *The Epistle to the Romans* (IVP/Eerdmans 1988) p437

You and I, just like those Romans to whom Paul was writing, have been touched by God. He has drawn us into the fellowship of his people, he has made us part of the body of Christ. And as part of that, he has given us his Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God lives within us – but we so often keep him dormant. We don't live in a way that allows him to act through us, really to empower us. But once we grasp that fact – that we are all, properly speaking, “charismatic” Christians, people of God gifted by the Holy Spirit, then it should have clearly seen ramifications in our life together. The section of chapter 12 which we're looking at this morning (vv3-8) gives us some pointers as to what that charismatic community of the gospel should look like. There are three strands to it here – **Humility, Mutuality and Commonality**. Let's have a look at what Paul has to say about them.

1. **HUMILITY** (v3)

One thing that this is clearly not about is status. When God gives us the gift of his Holy Spirit, and through that Spirit gives us gifts which we are to use for his glory, there is absolutely no way that those gifts are to be used to give ourselves some kind of status in comparison to others. We all have gifts from God, things which we can do which are helpful – needful, even – for the building up of the church. Of course, some of those gifts are more visible than others. Some of those gifts are granted to only a few people. But they are all necessary. They are all to be used. They are all to be used wisely and humbly.

Never forget that they are gifts, gifts of grace from God. He does not give them out as rewards for long service or for hard work. He gives them to be used for his glory and for the task of mission in this world. No-one can possibly be in a position to brag about their gifts. And no-one, conversely, should feel that they have been left out because they haven't got a particular gift. Some people, unfortunately, see some of the gifts that God graciously hands out as somehow “badges” of success. Some say that without one particular gift you are not a “proper” Christian. That is utter rubbish and I challenge anyone to demonstrate from Scripture that that's the case. So there is no need for anyone, as Paul says here, to “*think of yourself more highly than you ought.*” Be humble in the way you behave and in the way you exercise your gifts.

We are all to think of ourselves “*with sober judgement*”. Eugene Peterson puts this verse like this in *The Message*: “*The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what God does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.*” We have nothing to offer to God in terms of our own worth, our own goodness – and we're all in the very same boat in that sense. So when God touches our lives and gives us his gifts through the Holy Spirit, we have absolutely no basis on which to declare, suggest, or even imply that we are any better than anyone else, that we have any higher gift to offer the church. And do you know who finds that hardest to accept in church? The person standing here. But it's true. None of us has any cause whatsoever to “*think of ourselves more highly than we ought.*” And until we all reach that same point of humility, we will not make the progress that God wants us to make.

2. **MUTUALITY** (vv4,5)

Of course, that could lead to a situation where we're all so self-effacingly humble that no-one ever does anything. We could retreat into our shells and do very little, really. But Paul goes on to say that we really do need each other. He uses that same image that he used when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth a couple of years earlier – although he doesn't elaborate quite as much here. He describes the Christian community, the Church, the congregation – it works on all levels – as a body. “*Just as each of us has one body with many members ... so in Christ we who are many form one body.*”

In other words, we need each other. We cannot live alone as Christians. Of course, it's tempting to think that if we have the Holy Spirit, we can cope on our own. In fact, there are those who argue precisely that. They don't like to read Christian books or commentaries and Bible study guides. They don't listen to sermons (other than to check their “soundness”). They don't feel the need to listen to other Christians.

They have the Holy Spirit and he leads them into all truth without the need for any other intermediary. And there are those who are so sure of their own giftings that they can't really conceive of anyone else in a congregation having anything to contribute in that area. The logical extension of this is, of course, that they don't need the church at all and their attendance falls off. Or they set up their own little church around themselves. That's a very dangerous path to tread. Be very wary of it, and of those whom espouse it.

We need each other just as the body needs all its organs and limbs to function in the best possible way. As Paul points out to the Corinthians, one part of the body cannot look down on another part and say that it's not needed. Nor can any part of the body assume that it is useless and surplus to requirements. That goes just as much for the Body of Christ, the church. None of us here can look down on anyone else and say that they're not needed. And none of us here should look at everyone else and say, "Well, they don't need me and my little gift."

And I believe it works on another level, too. We cannot isolate ourselves from other congregations, either in this city or in the denominations and groupings of which we are a part. As a church we have things to learn from others and things to contribute to others. We are failing in our responsibility if we assume that this is all there is to church life. We must recognise the mutuality that is inherent in our life in the Spirit and do all that we can to foster it. "*Each member belongs to all the others*" and we need to recognise just how much we are interdependent in our worship, our witness and our fellowship.

3. COMMONALITY (vv6-8)

Having established our interdependence, Paul goes on to show some specific ways in which we can demonstrate it. His argument is effectively – you all have gifts: you need each other: so use your gifts for the good of others. And he lists some gifts that we receive through the power of the Holy Spirit. There are half a dozen or so gifts listed here. Some of them appear as part of other lists of gifts that Paul describes in other letters – *1 Corinthians* and *Ephesians* contain the best known ones. And it's clear, I think, from the fact that none of the lists is quite the same as the others, that these are not intended to be exhaustive or exclusive lists. Paul is simply giving us some examples.

And in the context of Paul's message here, it's appropriate that the gifts he mentions are all directed towards *others*. Some of them you might not necessarily think of as "spiritual" gifts, but, again from the context, it's clear that Paul regards them as such. There are seven which are mentioned in this passage and we'll look at them using the words by which the NIV translates them. (If you're using a different version, you may well find some differences in emphasis, but the basic ideas hold good, I believe.)

Prophecy is the gift of being able to speak God's words directly into a situation. It's not simply foretelling the future, as the word has come to mean in many contexts. Nor is it just preaching, as some would like it to be. Those who prophesy are given insight into situations and the Holy Spirit gives them the words that need to be said, usually for the building up of the person or people towards whom it is directed or to act as a kind of warning. It will not, of course, ever take the place of Scripture or in any way contradict Scripture. In fact, the prophecy may well be to direct people towards a particular passage which will be of use to them in their situation. But it is certainly to be used for building up the people of God – which Paul makes more explicit in *1 Corinthians 14*.

Serving, teaching and **encouraging** are fairly obvious, I think. And there's no doubt that they need an object. You cannot do these things without doing them for others. **Service** clearly encompasses a variety of different things, but it certainly requires humility to be able to offer it, and often humility to accept it. **Encouraging** can often be a lost art in church life, but with a bit of practice, we should all be able to offer encouragement to others as we thank them for their service or assure them of our prayers. It can be an enormous help to those who maybe don't find themselves at the centre of attention – or who, like the

Sunday School teachers, for example, fulfil their call and exercise their gifts somewhere where they are not actually seen by most people.

Contributing to the needs of others is another gift that has to be exercised towards other people. And there's a strong suggestion that the next gift, **leadership**, is closely linked to that. Many suggest, and some translations try to make it explicit, that the **leadership** referred to here is leadership in the area of distributing gifts. Whatever the case, the exhortation is to do it "*diligently*". Those who are leaders, in whatever area of the life of the Body of Christ, need to take their responsibilities seriously and thoughtfully.

It should not become a chore, however, and that is made clear in the way in which Paul treats the last gift, **showing mercy**. This refers to acts of kindness shown to those who are in need – the sick, the poor, those who struggle with the effects of their age, and so on. Those who reach out to help them should do it "*cheerfully*" – the same word Paul uses in *2 Corinthians 9:7* to describe our giving. It's the word that eventually gave rise to our English word "hilarious" – although, of course, it didn't mean that in quite the same way in Paul's day. Nevertheless, there should be an exuberant joy about our giving, our loving – indeed, the exercise of all our gifts.

Paul's vision of a church that is truly living in the Spirit is one in which everyone recognises that they have a place – and recognises the place of others, too. There is a humility which pervades the fellowship, as people use their gifts for the good of others without getting puffed up or parading their own gifts as the badge of some kind of super-spirituality. And if it is done properly, then it should be evident to anyone who comes into that fellowship, that congregation. We have been given the Holy Spirit. He gives us his gifts. Of that there is no doubt. Our responsibility is to use those gifts for the good of others and for the building up of the Body of Christ here on earth. Let's pray for God's help to do that.