

## ***Gifts and Graces***

**Romans 12:6-21**

Few things in life create more dismay than having a gifted, qualified person in the perfect position for their skill set and then see them fail, for no other reason than they lacked the wisdom, maturity, or dedication to handle the responsibility. This occurs all the time, of course, in many different settings, which is why there are many frustrated bosses, irritated colleagues, disenchanted boards, disgruntled voters, etc., etc., etc., due to the recognition that a person with so much potential has to be removed from their place of authority, if not fired.

One of the more celebrated examples in recent times is the case of 33-year-old (now former) Illinois Congressman, Aaron Schock, who resigned at the end of March in humiliation after a number of House ethics violations came to light. It began with a *Washington Post* article in early February that featured his gaudy redecoration of his Capitol office in *Downton Abbey* style—all at taxpayer expense. Then, it was noted his reimbursements and expense accounts were a little shady, such as billing the government for roughly 90,000 more miles for use of his personal vehicle than the actual odometer read in total mileage. This led to revelations of questionable real estate transactions involving donors, lavish trips for himself and staffers at taxpayer expense, Katy Perry concert tickets for interns, as well as a number of other things, including the purchase of a \$5000 podium for himself modeled on the president's own. Now how dumb is that?

Needless to say, Illinois voters were “shocked” by this, as were many Washington insiders of both parties, who played innocent to

their own constituents while, with a wink and a nod, they hurriedly tried to hide their own indiscretions! However, Rep. Patrick McHenry, the deputy whip of the House, probably summed it up best for all involved:

I think Aaron is a very intelligent person - he has had a great career in public service from his time on the school board, his time in the state House to his time in Congress so I think it's a real loss. I think it's a real loss.

Many would agree, given Schock's political star quality and potential for many years of public service. For Illinois voters, this is yet another loss they've suffered in a long line of political scandals, Republican and Democrat alike, that continue to plague the land of Lincoln.

As much as Aaron Schock will live in infamy with his public failure, he represents many who never reach their potential because their self-interests and -delusions get in the way of their suitability, sensibilities, and success. They let their egos get in the way; they make bad choices, they do stupid things, they take unnecessary risks, and they fool themselves while they're taking advantage of the respect and trust others have invested in them. Yes, sometimes smart people never get caught doing dumb things, but more often, they do. When they do, it's such a shame that everything they could be is often lost and their natural and acquired skills are viewed as liabilities as much as, at one time, they were viewed as gifts.

Over the course of my years in ministry, I've seen the same thing hold true with both clergy and laity who take positions in or outside of the church. People who are so gifted in what they do, but let their lack of judgment, discretion, or wisdom ultimately define

their reputation and legacy. Religious institutions are often some of the most vulnerable settings for this kind of moral failure, because we set high standards and so much rides on the personal trust between members with little or no oversight. For many good reasons, people of faith want to presume the best in each other and in their leaders, and for the most part, we can. But that hopeful assurance is never a guarantee that people will always behave their best or in the best interests of their spiritual community or faith. The fallout from scandals of any type, as we've seen from time to time, can be devastating to spiritual communities, particularly if they are egregious, as it erodes the fundamental trust we rely on.

It's not difficult to list underlying reasons for personal failure: egoism (self-centeredness) and egotism (arrogance), a lack of transparency and accountability, coercion and intimidation tactics by those in power, collective denial, avoidance of conflict, clashing personalities, malicious behavior, toxic attitudes, and character issues like personal pride, fear, neglect, laziness, apathy, and a lack of consideration toward others. Whatever the underlying reasons might be, there are times when even the most gifted persons can lack grace in terms of how they view themselves, how they treat others, or how they handle certain situations. This is true for anyone, regardless of what position they may be in or how highly they are regarded. And sadly, a lack of grace often translates into personal disgrace.

Now my point here isn't to make us start questioning the integrity of anyone in particular; nor am I wagging my finger at certain branches of the larger Church which have suffered through scandal upon scandal. It is, though, to remind us to be wise in our

estimation of ourselves and others—wise to the way egos and psychological needs can often undermine the best we can be, even those we feel are specially gifted in what they do. The principal reason for addressing this is because, in our text today, the Apostle Paul was equally cautious in his encouragement to those who were gifted by God in specific ways in the early church.

Many of us are already well acquainted with this passage in Romans 12, since it may have shaped our view of what a church should be. Back when I was in seminary and then later serving my first church, this chapter, along with I Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, was highlighted as the ideal image of what the Christian community was meant to be. It's a description of the spiritual gifts found in churches, which was a major emphasis in the 1970s and 1980s. Charismatic and Pentecostal churches sparked the initial interest in spiritual gifts, though it wasn't long before Evangelical and mainline congregations jumped on board as well.

The reason the “charismatic movement” took off is because it put the sense of God from the pulpit into the pew. It was an effective way to strengthen elements of congregational life, particularly in Protestant traditions. Those elements were lay ministry, democratic governance, and the dynamic flow of energy and enthusiasm in local church ministry, i.e., to develop ministries according to people's gifts, rather than by traditional roles and rules. Even into the present we've attempted to do something like that here, by forming ministry teams based on inspiration or interest (instead of inheritance), as well as emphasizing people's suitability for a certain positions, over simply filling in an available slot with a willing volunteer.

Back in the day, popular resources to support this endeavor would include books on developing awareness and appreciation of the Holy Spirit, Spiritual Gift inventories, guides for using gifts of the Spirit, church renewal seminars, retreats, and the like. It was common for people to identify their own spiritual gifts, while helping others to discern theirs. Many believed this “charismatic renewal” would be the next great reformation in the worldwide Church.

Frankly, there is something compelling and empowering when individuals sense the actual presence of God’s own Spirit within or among them, expressed through the use of a particular gift or two. In some ways, much benefit has been derived from organizing churches around the notion of spiritual gifts. One could identify those who possessed the gifts of leadership, while for others, it might be teaching, or encouragement, or organizing, or generosity, or mercy. Those who were exceptional in their trust of God were recognized for having the gift of faith. Those who spoke truth to power had the gift of prophecy, while those with recognized wisdom were gifted as such. It was a way for us to sense we are all instruments of God’s grace as we channel the presence of God into something that was good, concrete, and effective. It only got squirmy for mainline churches when we had to figure out what to do with Paul’s inclusion of speaking in tongues and miracles.

But along with the benefit of spiritual renewal came the awareness that “charismatic gifts” were not necessarily the panacea for all of the church’s problems. At times, things became more complicated and problematic. If charisma became the basis for deciding who does what in the church, it could quickly run off the

rails once people's egos got in the way. Charisma, in itself, is risky business, especially when a person's will and self-interest take unfair advantage of those who've invested trust in them. Or, as it often happens, ministry by gifts started becoming an excuse for some to not get involved—of leaving everything to those who appeared more gifted and skilled to do the work.

I wonder if this concern may have been the Apostle Paul's as well, as far back as when he first presented the idea of spiritual gifts. I see in this chapter an interesting cautionary flag that's raised, which I didn't notice years ago. What I think he did was for each of the gifts that he listed here in Romans 12:6-8, there appears to be a corresponding word of caution in verses 9-16 (a similar counterbalance takes place between I Corinthians 12 and 13). I sense this reveals Paul's wariness from experience over how spiritual gifts could and had been improperly used, which is why his churches failed to reach their potential (big egos seemed to be a problem for the Pauline churches in particular).

The first gift Paul noted in his short (and perhaps even random) list of gifts was "prophecy, in proportion to faith." To be clear, this isn't forecasting the future like a clairvoyant, mind you, as much as it was proclaiming the truth—possessing the ability to see things as they truly are, of identifying the trends and discerning the outcome—and of summoning the courage to speak truth to power. In other words, a prophetic voice was somewhere between having a discerning mind and being a bold proclaimer, at times a whistleblower. Now how might that be abused? By someone who became arrogant about it or rude, or prideful; or even more damaging, by calling out someone in a

punitive manner, humiliating them, shaming them in public. That's the abuse of this particular gift. So what was his word of caution? It's in verse 9: "let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good." In other words, speak the truth in love, not arrogantly or punitively or with condemnation (don't destroy others in your truth-telling); but at the same time, don't let your fears or feelings prevent you from telling the truth. Some good advice.

The next gift he listed was "ministry, in ministering," or a better way to phrase it, the gift of service and serving others. That's a fairly common gift for people to possess—one that benefits everyone and allows a service-oriented person to sense fulfillment, as they serve others in Christ's name. Yet, how can that become undone and misused? Depending on the situation, a person might become resentful of those they serve, or find fault with their needs. Service with a grudge is toxic to relationships. What's the grace that turns that around? Again, verse 10: "love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." In other words, keep the focus on those being helped; express respect and honor, let your attitude be based in love. Again, this makes good sense.

This continues on for each of the gifts Paul cites and notices in people, encouraging them to exercise their gifts, yet holding them to account for any tendency toward misuse or abuse. For the teacher, who is frustrated and tired of teaching or training others—vs. 11: don't give up, keep persevering, don't lag in zeal or spirit. For the counselor who is there to offer encouragement and comfort to those who are depressed or in endless despair—vs. 12: rejoice in hope, be patient with suffering, persevere in prayer. To the one inspired to give

generously—vs. 13: don't just do it for your friends or family, remember the needs of all church members, and don't forget to give generously even to strangers and those you don't know.

For the leader who gets ornery over those who challenge their decisions or resist their vision—vs. 14: “bless those who persecute you;” don't try to silence them, or become a tyrant, or persecute them; “bless and do not curse them.” Finally, on this particular laundry list of gifts, Paul mentions those gifted with compassion and kindness or mercy. His admonition is simple: listen and be sensitive to where people are coming from, instead of imposing yourself upon them. Identify with their pain, embrace their joy. Be in solidarity with those in distress—vs. 15: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.”

I sense, for Paul, all of this gets summarized in the word, *charis*, which is a double entendre meaning both “gift” and “grace.” So be gracious, be grateful, be filled with the best inspirations of your gifts—it's all the same. Be the best you can be, for when you are, when you put forth your best effort and outlook and attitude, then you will be a channel of God's Spirit into another person's life. And that will be evident in the Spirit of the community. Love is realized and evident in how people view and treat each other. “Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate yourself with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are” (vs. 16).

Granted, this isn't some deep theological insight Paul is offering, just practical advice—wisdom that will help us at any stage of life to reach our potential as loving, gracious, and grace-filled people. It's wisdom that reminds us that, in this Gospel life we lead,

we are called to a selfless and self-giving life of grace—of self-giving in order to make others feel as if they're embraced by God's grace. A clever mnemonic way to remember this is to remember that "live" becomes "love" when we replace the "l" with an "o" for "others." Even a child could figure out the wisdom of this!

Remember, gifted, talented, and skillful people are only as good as they can be when their egos and self-interests are replaced with a service-oriented grace. That's true at every level of life—from public service to private life. Each of us reach our best potential when we exercise care and consideration toward others and strengthen a spirit of trust and love.

That's how the gifts of God are meant to be expressed and shared. May we know the gifts of God offered in and through our lives and, in the right spirit, may we also use them well to make our church, our home, and our world a true place of grace.

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31 May 2015