

Small Group Lesson Guides
“Sharing Our Lives” July Series
Based on Romans 12

GENERAL PREPARATION FOR SERIES

Background on Romans

Author: Paul

Date: Most scholars date Romans between AD 55 and 58. It is likely written from Corinth (Greece).

The Roman Church: It’s important to remember that “churches” in Christianity’s early days weren’t like churches as we imagine them now. That is to say, there wasn’t one big building in the community designated specifically for worship, fellowship, and study where all the local believers gathered. Instead, a “church” was often a small group of believers that met regularly in someone’s house. Think about the group of Christians with whom you’ll be sharing this lesson—that’s kind of what church was like for people to whom Paul was writing!

Occasion: Romans, in many ways, is a letter of self-introduction (1:1-17; 15:14-33). Paul has never been to see the Roman believers (in fact, it is unclear how Christianity reached Rome). However, he wants to go, and he also knows that the Romans could help him achieve his future missionary ambitions of taking the Gospel to Spain. Paul’s lack of familiarity with many in the Roman church means that he speaks more generally and coherently than perhaps in other epistles where he speaks to specific congregational issues; this makes the text easier for us, as modern interpreters, to understand.

However, that’s not to say that Paul has no knowledge of the Roman Christians and their struggles. Evidence suggests that the Roman church was having difficulties incorporating Jewish and Gentile believers. In AD 49, Jewish Christians were expelled from Rome, but early in Nero’s reign (AD 54), they were allowed to return; when they did, however, they found that Gentile Christianity was dominant in the area. In this light, portions of Paul’s letter read as an attempt to reveal to both strands of believers that, in Christ, they share a new, unified identity.

Overall Theme: God’s BIG plan of salvation. Paul doesn’t just lay out the story of Jesus; he gives the Romans the story of the Jewish people—the prophets, the wandering, and the inadequacy of humanity to achieve righteousness through the law. Upon this ground, he presents Christ as the answer, the path to freedom.

Situation of Chapter 12: Broadly speaking, chapters 1-11 are theological; they deal with concepts and lay out Paul’s case for the Christian faith. Chapters 12-16 deal with the practicality of what that faith means for the behavior of those who believe. Much of our focal chapter for July, chapter 12, speaks to the way believers should relate to other people, particularly those who share faith with them in the Body of Christ.

Week 2:
“Sharing Our Passions”
Romans 12:5-8

LESSON PREP: COMMENTARY

These insights have been gathered from the Smyth and Helwys and New Interpreter’s Bible commentaries on the book of Romans. They are offered here to help discussion leaders prepare for the lesson; feel free to use these insights in your discussion of today’s passage with your small group.

Commentary on Passage

- Unity of the Body of Christ
 - Jesus is the foundation. We are “One Body in the Messiah.” (v.5)
 - Use of Spiritual gifts is intended for the edification of the entire Church.
 - One of Paul’s most powerful images for explaining the combined unity and diversity of the Church is that of the body. (See I Corinthians 12)
 - To be “in Christ” is to be a member of the Messiah’s people; to speak of ‘one body in Christ’ is to emphasize the unity of that people despite its obvious diversity.

- Diversity of Gifts
 - No gift is better than another.
 - We must recognize that one’s gift is only part of the Spirit’s arsenal. Others have different gifts; yet we are all part of the same community.
 - God has created a new thing; a living body. He has given each member gifts that enable him/her to contribute to the welfare of the whole.

- Gifts of the Spirit
 - Spiritual gifts are ministries with which Christians are gifted by the Spirit for the good of the believing community.
 - Seven gifts are identified in this passage:
 - Prophecy (to be exercised ‘in proportion to faith’)
 - Service
 - Teaching
 - Encouragement (exhortation)
 - Giving
 - Leadership
 - Showing kindness
 - Spiritual gifts are never given for personal pride—only for building up the Body.
 - God gives us the gifts according to His grace, design, and purpose.
 - Spiritual gifts are to be used by believers in relationship to one another—never for personal attention or gain.

- Just as God gave the Apostle Paul grace for his task (vs.3), so God gives the Church grace for its multiple and mutually supportive tasks, and whatever they are, they must be exercised to the full extent of one's powers.
- In Christian Community
 - "God did not give His gift in order that we should hate each other or that spiritual things should become an excuse for warfare, but so that we should enjoy harmony and friendship and the common salvation of all." Gennadius of Constantinople
- Righteous Living
 - Disciplined thinking is at the very root basic Christian living.
 - All Christian obedience is that those in Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, are to offer God true, sacrificial worship.
 - Motive for using our Spiritual gifts is important. The use of gifts of this nature is motivated by love for God and each other. (See I Corinthians 13)

LESSON GUIDE

Sharing the Topic

The purpose of this section is to introduce the theme for today's lesson.

- **Within the context of your Christian life, what brings the most excitement to you? Where do you find the most energy—the greatest feeling of accomplishment and contribution? What is the one thing that you simply MUST do in order to fill the longing of your heart as you serve others? What is your passion in life? What makes your heart sing?**
- Today's lesson from Romans 12:5-8 focuses our attention on the answers to these questions. God has a great plan for each of us who claim the name of Jesus. His plan is for us as uniquely designed individuals. God's plan is for the building up of His kingdom work through His Church. As members of the believing community, we are given the responsibility of being good stewards of the spiritual gifts selected for us by the Holy Spirit. Collectively, God has designed through the work of the Holy Spirit the distribution of gifts within each one of us so that His plan for reaching the world through His Church is accomplished.

Sharing Scripture

The purpose of this section is to introduce the focal passage of today's lesson.

- As we begin today's study, take a moment to reflect on what was shared in last Sunday's lesson. **How do the words from Romans 12:1-5 set the stage for today's text?**
- Perhaps reading aloud the full passage (Romans 12:1-8) will help begin today's discussion.

Sharing Insights

The purpose of this section is to examine the focal passage, exploring its meaning and application points. This week, the insights have been prepared by Allison Lairmore; please read her story and share it with your class, using her reflection to prompt discussion within your class!

Maybe you are like me. When I read about the work of the Holy Spirit, I get a little nervous. After all, I work with children! I am a concrete thinker. I like to see, hear, smell, touch, taste. I am a little put off by the things that I cannot fully see and understand. And the work of the Holy Spirit is so mysterious, isn't it? We trust the promise of Jesus and believe that God's Spirit lives within us, yet we can't put our finger on Him. We understand that the Holy Spirit is the gift of Jesus and serves as our Paraclete (Helper), our Comforter, and our Counselor. However, we are unable to get a visual on how He is actually working in our lives. We appreciate being part of the "big

picture” for God’s master work through the Church, but it can be a little overwhelming to think of ordinary folks like us being used in such extraordinary ways. At times we can identify the “moving of the Spirit” in our lives, but isn’t it really hard to describe what we mean to someone else? Sure is for me!

So when I read this passage from Romans 12, I get just a little queasy—a little uneasy. The Spirit has gifted me, to do what, to build up whom? What if I get it wrong—what if I can’t correctly identify my gift? What if I hate the gift He gives me? What if it doesn’t fit? Can I send it back? What if I mess up and all of God’s big plan for the Church comes to a screeching halt?

But then, I read Romans 12:4-6a: “Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ’s body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other. In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well.”

Whew! The pressure is off! God’s big plan doesn’t rely on just little old me! It’s all about Christ. It’s all about grace. It’s all about the collective “us!” Talk about freedom! Talk about excitement! Talk about passion!

In God’s big plan, each one of us has a distinct, unique part. He identifies that spot for us. Then God’s Spirit equips us to fulfill our part of that plan as we lean into the giftedness He has selected. I don’t choose my gift and neither do you. That’s a good thing since none of us have all the information about the Master’s plan. We have no idea how to orchestrate it. We can’t even begin to sketch out what God’s complete will and purpose—His design for His Church is. So we accept our part, our gift, with faith that God knows what He is doing. As we open our hearts and become willing to accept His call on our lives, God will use us as He sees fit.

Just like in our amazingly, creatively designed physical bodies, within the Church each part has its unique function. Each “member” works in beautiful harmony with all the other members. God’s design is a masterpiece. As in our physical bodies, our collective body, the Church, is “fearfully and wonderfully” made as expressed in Psalm 139. We are God’s creation. We are the Body of Christ.

Looking at the list provided in the Romans 12 text, we see seven distinct, identifiable gifts that make up the Body. (See I Corinthians 12:12-31 and Ephesians 4:11-16 for additional explanation and identification of spiritual gifts.) These are: prophecy, service, encouragement, teaching, giving, leadership, and showing kindness. No gift is better than another. There is no personal pride involved. The exercise of each gift is for the purpose of strengthening, equipping, and building up the Church. In God’s sovereign plan, spiritual gifts are never to be used to draw attention to one individual believer, but

rather to edify the entire believing community. And in this divine plan, it is God who receives glory.

As I continue to grow as a believer in Jesus, time and again I am challenged by Christians who have the gift of prophecy/preaching/proclaiming. Particular moments stand out when their words as they shared God's word touched my heart and drew me into closer relationship with the Living Word. The passion with which the message was proclaimed spoke to me and allowed me a fresh perspective on a familiar scripture. Sometimes that change in perspective convicted me and allowed me to embrace a deeper understanding of who God wants me to be. Have you ever had a similar experience?

Or like me, have you ever been encouraged by believers who were gifted leaders—humble, consistent, always looking for ways to broaden our awareness of what the future could be if we move ahead in faith? People with the Spiritual gift of leadership don't need charisma to lead. Instead, the Holy Spirit places within that leader the energy, creativity, and passion to move others forward, to help them overcome obstacles as they move through the challenge. Leadership in the truest sense is modeled after the example of Jesus who showed us that to lead effectively, we must first become servants.

In my personal experience and in my observation of other believers, I have noticed that passion and giftedness seem to go hand in hand. I believe that this is part of God's design. The "grace" that is measured out to us and the expression of our "gift" fit perfectly together.

For instance, if God has given you the gift of teaching, then teach with the passion and excitement that are part of who God has made you to be. Chances are you can't imagine NOT teaching! Deep within you is the desire to help people learn of God's great love and plan. As you live out your passion and calling, the Church will become stronger and God's work will be done.

If God has given you the gift of giving, then by all means, be generous in using that gift so that the Body of Christ will be blessed. After all, your heart is constantly looking for ways to give to others, right? The satisfaction you find in meeting the tangible needs of people is part of your giftedness. The "open handed" approach to sharing financially comes easy to you. It is part of who you are as God's child. Celebrate His gift in you! Use the gift of generous giving to increase the resources needed for God's kingdom work within your community of believers.

If you have the gift of encouragement, please share that gift! It comes (super)naturally to you! That note of encouragement is worded just as it should be. The text or email arrives at just the right time. The chicken pastry that you take to the family that is receiving bad news or the chocolate cake that you excitedly share with the new neighbor is exactly what God will use to touch the lives of those who receive the delicious

encouragement. Your kind words, actions, smiles, and pats on the back are so needed in the life of our Body. Heaven knows how much!

Let's get real for a moment about this mystery of how the Holy Spirit works. It can be off-putting to claim a spiritual gift as your own. After all, how can you really know what your gift is? A general (non-scientific, just practical) rule for uncovering your spiritual gift is to answer these questions: **“Related to God’s Kingdom work, what captures my attention? What stirs my heart? What do I have opportunity to do right now?”** After answering the questions, then give it a try. See if your interest, passion, and gift come together in such a way that your heart sings!

Sharing Stories

This section captures the true heart of the July series, which is helping members of the Winter Park Baptist Body of Christ “share their lives” by telling one another more about themselves.

- Consider dividing your class members into groups of three. If possible, include folks in each “triplet” who don’t know each other so well. Provide each group with a marker and tear sheet. Ask each group to select a “scribe” to record highlights of the group’s discussion centered around one or more of these conversation prompts:
 - **When have you been blessed by the unexpected encouragement of a fellow believer? How do you think that person knew what your exact need was?**
 - **How has God changed you as His word has been shared with you? How did the prophet/preacher/proclaimer catch the attention of your heart?**
 - **Think of a time of transition within your church family. Who helped navigate the needed change? How did you see the spiritual gift of leadership used to build up your church family, even if the transition was difficult?**
 - **In what ways has your faith been strengthened by Christians who follow God’s lead in using their spiritual gifts? Based on today’s text, what spiritual gifts are you able to see in those people?**
 - Take a moment to reflect, then identify the spiritual gift that you feel God has given you. **How comfortable are you in self-identifying that gift? In what ways can you thank God for His design, purpose, plan in your life? What is one example of the Holy Spirit using your gift to build up other Believers?**
- Display tear sheets and allow for large group discussion as time allows. Look for similarities among the information provided by the “triplets.”

Sharing Prayers

As the session draws to a close, allow class members to stay in groups of three to form “Prayer Triplets.” They will spend time together, praying along these lines:

- God, thank you for Your design and Your Spirit's work in making us into One Body. We praise you for including us in Your master plan.
- God, help us to discover the gifts Your Spirit has given to each of us. Help us, the members of Your Body, to enhance the work of your kingdom as we serve You. Thank you for taking away any fear and replacing it with Your assurance of grace, provision, and guidance as we love, minister, and care for others.
- God, stretch us as you shape us, allowing us to experience the unique calling and passion that You have placed within us. Grant us the willingness to grow into the likeness of Jesus as we build each other up as One Body, united in You. Amen.