

## **Romans 12:1–21**

### **FruitFullNess – For mission**

Today we're continuing our FruitFullNess series, learning about spiritual gifts in the Bible. It was great to have Reverend Scott Windred launch the series last week by showing us from Exodus 31 how God has given his Holy Spirit to people through history.

We also focussed on how all spiritual gifts are given to us by God. They're not something we've earned, and therefore we use them for God's mission.

What is God's mission? Well Romans 12:21 sums it up beautifully:

*'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'*

(Romans 12:21)

Our God is in the business of overcoming evil with good. It's his mission. Today we're going to see how God sends the Holy Spirit to fill us so that we bear fruit for his Kingdom.

When we talk about 'bearing fruit' we're talking about the natural outworking of a healthy Christian life. When Jesus came into our world 2000 years ago love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and a whole raft of other good things flowed from his life. Jesus tells us that when we live our lives connected with Him, fixing our minds on him, and filling our hearts with his Word, we will bear fruit. Spiritual gifts lead to spiritual fruit.

And so today from Romans 12 we're going to see:  
–What the Holy Spirit makes us, how the Holy Spirit shapes us, and where the Holy Spirit takes us.

## **(vv. 1–2) What the Holy Spirit makes us...**

Romans was originally written as a letter to Christians in 1<sup>st</sup> century Rome. In the first 11 chapters, Paul lays out how Jesus has come to free us from sin and death and how his death and resurrection reveals God's righteousness and offers us God's grace when we take him at his Word and believe in Him. From chapter 12 onwards Paul applies the gospel to our lives. This is why in v.1 he writes:

*'Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship.'*

(Romans 12:1)

Here Paul is saying, that considering God's mercy through Jesus, this is how we should live. Just as Jesus has given himself up as a sacrifice for us, so we are to give our lives for him.

For Jews the language of sacrifice meant death. Back in the day you would take your bull, goat, or pigeon, kill it, and offer it to God as a sacrifice. This act of obedience was a way of showing repentance and a reminder that sin brings death.

However, the blood of animals could never cover our sins and that's why these dead sacrifices only pointed towards a greater sacrifice – that of Jesus Christ. Through the cross Jesus reveals himself as the one perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Only Jesus' perfect life, offered for us once and for all upon the cross, can ever atone for our sins.

And this is why as Christians we don't offer dead sacrifices, instead we offer ourselves as living sacrifices. Sometimes people think of 'spiritual gifts' as superpowers that'll make us rich, powerful, or more 'holy' than others in the church. Instead, here we see that the Spiritual gifts make us sacrifices.

The problem with living sacrifices is that we keep crawling off that altar. And this is why v.2 says:

*“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing, and perfect will.”*

(Romans 12:2)

By putting our lives in God's hands and saying “take the wheel Jesus”, we're committing to a process of transformation. Here we're called not to go with the flow of culture and the world around us. We're not called to 'get with the times' or be 'relevant'. Instead, we're to ask the Holy Spirit to transform us, conforming our will to God's will.

This is why every Sunday in the Lord's prayer we say: “your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven”. This is a dangerous prayer but if you want to use the spiritual gifts God's given you and if you want your life to bear lasting fruit, you're going to have to let God change you.

Now the word 'change' is a scary word for us Anglicans but here the Bible tells us that when we let God control our lives, we'll be able to live according to his good, pleasing, and perfect will.

I know how quickly I stuff up my life when I try to control it. By offering ourselves up as living sacrifices, we commit to God's mission in the world and this is what the next section of this passage is all about...

### **(vv. 3–8) Who the Holy Spirit helps us help...**

In verses 3–8 we see that all spiritual gifts help us help others. Not to help us help ourselves or elevate us above others, rather, the Holy Spirit humbles us by giving us gifts for mission.

v.3 says:

*“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.”*  
(Romans 12:3)

This ‘measure of faith’ describes the types of spiritual gifts we’re given. And in the following verses we see that they’re all body building gifts, they help us build up the body of Christ.

Look at v.4:

*“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”* (Romans 12:4–5)

The church is an organic family of people with different gifts. And yet our gifts are for building others up, we belong to each other.

This sort of thinking jams the cultural moment we live in. We’re taught to be individuals, to stand out from the

crowd, and to use all we have to make life as comfortable as possible for ourselves first and foremost.

And yet here the Bible tells us we will never find our true purpose in life until we use the gifts God's given us for the good of others! To quote the Blues Brothers: "We're on a mission from God."

What follows is a list of 7 spiritual gifts which we'll look at one by one:

First in v.6 we see that prophecy is a gift. A prophet is someone who speaks God's Words. Jesus was called a prophet and when the Holy Spirit is poured out on people at Pentecost they prophesy.

I believe people still receive messages from God in the church today, but we're told repeatedly in the Bible to test prophecies (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21). If something doesn't line up the Word of God (the Bible), it's not prophecy. The gift of prophecy will always build up the church and empower its people for mission, we see this repeatedly in the book of Acts where the Spirit guides missionaries as they share the gospel.

Second is serving in v.7. This shows us how broad these gifts are. You'll find people with this gift on the mowing roster, welcoming at the church door, washing up in the kitchen, and tidying up the kids' corner after others go home.

The third gift is teaching. We have people with this gift teaching in kids' church, training others to do AV, and leading Youth Group, Bible Studies, and RI lessons. Without teachers no one gets grounded in the gospel, and no one grows in faith.

The fourth gift is encouraging. Now again being a prophet sounds powerful and attractive but encouragers are just as important. You have no idea how many times in church I've felt discouraged and sorry for myself and along comes an encourager who points me back to God. One famous encourager is Barnabas (this may have been his nickname as Barnabas literally means 'son of encouragement'). Barny pops up throughout the book of Acts, funding mission and supporting missionaries wherever he goes. Awesome!

The fifth gift is generosity. Now you might think of money as a gift, but generosity is the true gift. Givers aren't showy and they're not always rich. We're all called to give generously to the church and to support the poor but people with the gift of generosity give thoughtfully and sacrificially at every opportunity, sharing their time, energy, and money.

The sixth gift is leadership. In our church our Wardens and Parish Council lead us humbly and sacrificially. Sadly in our world we often think of leaders as strong extroverts, people with assertive personalities and egos to boot, but with God leaders come in many shapes and sizes.

Think of Moses who stuttered, or Mary who led with gentle joy. In the church we need to encourage and pray for leaders, knowing they're as sinful and broken as we are. Leaders in the church must clearly be led by Jesus or they'll lead us astray.

The seventh gift is mercy. Now these people are rare, but you'll know them when you feel them. People with the gift of mercy will listen when others have switched off. They'll show compassion when no one else cares. They'll forgive you when everyone else has given up on you.

Every Christian has at least one of these gifts but if you can't decide which one you have because a few sound like you or none of them sounds like you, don't stress. This isn't an exhaustive list, there are plenty more gifts God gives and we shouldn't be worried so much about whether we know exactly which gift we have, but whether we're using them for mission. Our gifts will change as we grow but the purpose of spiritual gifts will never change. The Holy Spirit helps us help others.

### **(vv. 9–21) Where the Holy Spirit takes us...**

And this brings us to the end of this chapter which reads a bit like the Sermon on the Mount. They're brief quotable quotes with 10 do's and five do nots. If the Holy Spirit helps us help others, then you can bet your bottom dollar he's going to take us into the world to use them.

In v.9 we see that the Holy Spirit is enlisting us in His mission against evil:

*"Hate what is evil; cling to what is good."* (Romans 12:9)

Some of these directives apply to how we treat people in our church family, for instance v.10:

*"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves."* (Romans 12:10)

Others apply to how we treat people outside our church family like v.14:

*"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."* (Romans 12:14)

Ultimately these gifts are all about practising Jesus shaped love. Just as Jesus was joyful in hope, patient in

affliction, and faithful in prayer so we should follow in his footsteps. Just as Jesus showed hospitality and refused to repay evil for evil, so we are to live at peace with everyone as far as it depends on us (Romans 12:18).

The Holy Spirit helps us become more like Christ, and it's also the love of God that helps us to trust him for justice. V.19 and 20 are vital for understanding this section:

*"Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. (Romans 12:19)*

When we take revenge into our own hands it's rarely fair. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote: "Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself do not become a monster.... For when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you." This is why family feuds so often spiral out of control.

On the other hand, when we leave justice to God, we give our enemies opportunity to change. The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend. And this is sort of what v.20 is saying but it's also saying that when we repay unkindness with kindness, people are humbled into changing their behaviour. Revenge creates cycles of destruction but when we love our enemies, we become part of the solution rather than the problem.

Craig Keener tells a story of a Nigerian student he was teaching in the USA who got news of a riot in his home state:

"Thousands of radical Muslim youth had marched in the state capital to demand sharia, so Christians decided to stage a peaceful counter march, pleading that sharia law not be imposed. Muslims controlled the politics of the state, but Kaduna had a large Christian population that



finally decided to speak up. ...some Muslim youths began hurling stones at the Christian marchers... When some Christian youth hurled stones back, extremist Muslims suddenly attacked with automatic weapons and machetes, slaughtering hundreds, most of them women. Children were slaughtered on their way home from school; others returned to find their parents dead. I prayed with Sunday; his cousin had been killed, and he did not know whether his brothers, now missing, were dead or alive. "Rise up, O God," I cried passionately. "Avenge the blood of your servants!" When I finished, Sunday prayed. "Please forgive the Muslims and spare them," he pleaded, "because they do not have hope." I bowed my head in shame. Sunday's compassion was right. And for the safety of millions of our brothers and sisters like Sunday, we need to keep praying for peace — and speaking for truth."

Friends our God lavishes us with good gifts which the Holy Spirit helps us use for mission. The Holy Spirit makes us living sacrifices, so he can help us help others, and he takes us into the world not so that we might overcome evil with good. God calls us to be part of his mission in the world, so let's ask him to help us use our gifts today.